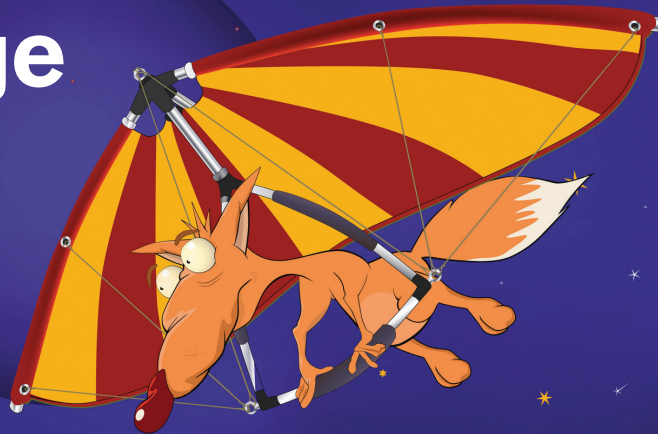


The last word

Hedge your bets



WHEN IT COMES TO PREDICTING THE FUTURE IN EDUCATION, IT'S WORTH GOING WITH THE FOXES RATHER THAN THE HEDGEHOGS, AS CATHERINE SCOTT EXPLAINS.

Predicting the future is a human preoccupation. We'd all like to know what comes next, so that we can adequately prepare. There's even a living to be made from it. Besides fortune tellers and astrologers, and science fiction, which has always been in part a form of speculating about the future, we have professional futurists who make a career of predicting what comes next on a national or international level.

The main difficulty for the field of futurism is that as a whole its predictions are generally incorrect. A case in point is the prediction made with great confidence in the 1970s that rapid advances in technology would shrink the working week to only a few days. Instead, the advent of mobile phones and the internet has shrunk our leisure time, with many of us always on call.

Consider how many of your students, or their parents, expect you to check and respond to their email – out of hours, on the weekend, even on annual leave.

In education, a constant theme has been the supposedly transformative potential of information and communication technol-

ogy (ICT). For the past 40 years ICT has been going to 'transform education,' and we're still waiting patiently for the technological miracle to happen. Meanwhile, teachers are routinely criticised for their – supposed – failure to facilitate the dawning of the new electronic age.

Not all attempts to predict what will happen next are unsuccessful, however. Research into which predictions actually come true has revealed that futurists come in two varieties. The first type make grand predictions, which rarely turn out to be correct while the second type make more modest prognostications, accompanied by a raft of 'ifs' and 'maybes,' but which are more accurate. That's all very well, but it's the grand pronouncements that are likely to grab the headlines – to be quietly forgotten when they turn out to be wrong.

Researchers have dubbed the first type of futurist 'hedgehogs,' and the second type 'foxes' – a reference to an aphorism attributed to the ancient Greek poet Archilochus: 'The fox knows many little things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' Futurist

hedgehogs know one thing and know it well: they have one big idea and they pursue it with certainty. Futurist foxes, on the other hand, know a bit about many things, draw their knowledge from many different domains and combine these to understand the present and predict the future. They're also very tentative about their conclusions, hence the 'ifs' and 'buts.' It's the foxes, not the hedgehogs, that hedge their bets.

Predicting how things will be can slide over into advocating how they should be. In this regard, education is particularly at risk of the advocacy of hedgehogs, those who know the one thing that will make education not just better but the best, and who promote their Big Idea with certainty. The activities of these ideas hedgehogs partly explain why education is prone to fads and fashions, which come and go with sometimes alarming speed. Their attention-grabbing ideas are easy to package and palatable to those looking for simple solutions.

The arrival – and unremarked-on disappearance – of the Big Idea that will fix education becomes, as a result, a semi-regular event. The complexity of the classroom, the importance of context, the many nuanced decisions that go to make up successful teaching are all ignored by those promoting the current Big Idea. We've all seen the ICT Big Idea wax and wane as the solution to what ails schools, but there have been many other Big Ideas from the hedgehog camp, the current one being personalised learning.

There's a lot to be said for ignoring the hedgehogs and going instead with the foxes, those who make carefully qualified suggestions for modest changes. While it might be uplifting to be inspired by the next Big Idea beloved of hedgehogs, it pays to remember that when it comes to success in predicting what comes next the more modest proposals of the foxes have a better track record. **T**

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