Scenario learning

BY EXAMINING ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS, WE CAN IDENTIFY WHAT WE BELIEVE IN AND VALUE, AND WHAT WE'RE WILLING TO WORK FOR, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

WE LIVE IN A RAPIDLY-CHANGING ENVIRONMENT that is so complex and overwhelming that it can be hard to see a way forward. One way used by futures-focused schools to help set their direction is to consider a number of alternative future scenarios. Each scenario imagines one possible future, rather than trying to encompass all the possibilities in one story. It enables schools to examine possible future developments and identify present opportunities in a structured way. Scenario learning works best when there are a number of alternative scenarios to consider, thus allowing us to assess different possible futures.

The best way to explore a scenario is to ‘live’ within the future described by it. We can then ask ourselves if we like this imagined world or in what way we would prefer it to be different. In this way we can gather insights and information that will enable us to better understand current trends in our society and what impact they will have on us in the future.

Scenarios are more than just tools for our learning; they’re a stimulus for action and they empower us by inviting us to take more control of our future. Thinking about future possibilities can generate sensitivity to possible changes and their implications much earlier in the change cycle.

Teaching Australia initiated a scenario building project in 2006, the results of which were published in Teaching for Uncertain Futures. Practicing principals and teachers, supported by the Neville Freeman Agency, developed four plausible scenarios, each set in the year 2030. Teaching Australia hopes the scenarios will provide ‘a platform for school communities, teachers and principals…to challenge their world view…, and find ways to influence and shape the professional agenda.’

The first scenario, ‘Under the Volcano,’ depicts an unhappy, unequal and uncaring society driven by consumerism and free choice, polarised into two classes of rich and poor, in which the poor are resentful and pessimistic, there is neighbourhood unrest and increased use of security forces.

In the second scenario, ‘A Farewell to Arms,’ a green and sustainable economy supports a more harmonious and optimistic society in which wellbeing and happiness in the community is a political goal.

In the third scenario, ‘The Grapes of Wrath,’ the economic boom has ended, jobs are scarce, the physical environment is harsh and unforgiving, the focus is on survival and pessimism is endemic. Individuals are competitive and society is disintegrating, in fact tearing itself apart. Values are survival-focused.

In the fourth scenario, ‘The Magic Mountain,’ society becomes corporatised, business takes over many of the roles and responsibilities of government and community groups, but because society relies on corporate social responsibility for providing a social safety net, a marginalised underclass emerges.

Such scenario building is more than simply an interesting intellectual exercise; its a way of describing our future world, and we’re confronted here with some unhappy pictures of potential tomorrows that are an extension of what is happening today. Are we happy with the directions that society appears to be taking, and the potential futures depicted in these scenarios? What do we intend to do about it, and what are the implications for what we are doing in schools?

Scenarios are a futures tool, a means to an end, an instrument for learning. Hopefully, as a result of considering the alternative scenarios, we’ll be able to be clearer as to what we believe in and value, and what we’re willing to work for.

In our schools, it’s important that we don’t take too narrow a focus in our curriculum. We not only prepare our students for their final exams but for life. Similarly we need to think not just about employment skills for our students, we need to consider how we go about creating a caring and sustainable society. Taking a longer view, considering trends and values is critical, as these scenarios demonstrate. Teaching Australia, in initiating this scenario project, encourages us to be proactive in choosing a desirable future for society.

Let’s learn from scenarios. [1]

David Loader is an education consultant and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. His latest book is Jousting for the New Generation: Challenges to contemporary schooling, published by ACER Press. Email davidloader@bigpond.com

REFERENCES

LINKS: email info@teachingaustralia.edu.au or phone 1800 337 872 or visit www.teachingaustralia.edu.au