

Futures in Education: Encouraging Reflective Practice

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This article looks at different ways of teaching and learning about alternative futures within the field of education. This is illustrated through three case studies: i) learning about global futures; ii) becoming a teacher; iii) exploring life changes. Each case study was also designed to encourage reflective practice and thus illustrates the crucial interrelationship between medium and message in the learning process.

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Futures in Education

I wish to begin by clarifying an important distinction - that between the 'future of education' and 'futures in education'. When people hear that I work in a Faculty of Education they frequently assume I am an expert on the future of education. They imagine I can gaze ahead and tell them what education will be like in, say, 2020. They expect me, therefore, to talk about probable futures - scenarios based on extrapolation from present educational and societal trends. Much more rarely they want me to tell them what education should look like in 2020, that is they are interested in preferable futures and how education might, for example, help create a more just and sustainable society.

The former view of educational futures is often unquestioningly used to justify existing utilitarian and managerial views of education, whilst the latter view raises much more fruitful questions about the purposes of formal education and, in particular, the potentially transformative role of education in changing times. There are, you will note, strong hints of the latter in the case studies that follow. Primarily, however, in this paper I am interested in what can be done now to help students think more critically and creatively about the future, both their own and in relation to wider society, i.e. the study of futures within education. I am interested in this because I train students who are going to be teachers in the first half of the 21st century. With only a handful of exceptions, it seems to me, futures studies has failed to engage with education at the school level and the complex lifeworld of teachers.

Three Case Studies

This paper contains three, necessarily brief, case studies of futures in education. Firstly, I explore learning about global futures. This examines the responses of first year undergraduates to learning about global and futures issues and asks whether this can ever solely be a cognitive concern. Secondly, I look at becoming a teacher. This examines the responses of students taking a degree in Education to a module entitled Education for Change, designed to raise questions about the purpose of education, the state of the world, and the need for a socially critical pedagogy. Finally, I look at exploring life changes. This reports on the way in which men's perceptions of the future change in mid-life and how they respond to this. Whilst each of these case studies focuses on different aspects of the future they all stress the need for self-reflective

practice as part of the process of transformative learning. All three case studies have arisen out of my work at Bath Spa University College.

Learning about Global Futures

One of the few examinations of the impact on students of learning about global futures is that by Rogers (1994) who comments:

Coming to grips with the complexity of the world's problems, confronting uncertainty about the future, and critically examining deeply held worldviews may cause emotional and existential turmoil. To try to cope with the onslaught of thoughts and feelings, people may resort to using defence mechanisms such as denial, suppression, intellectualisation or projection. Consequently, rather than being truly able to face the future, the protective defence mechanisms may cause people to retreat or disconnect from reality. (Rogers & Tough, 1996: 492-3).

In monitoring a Canadian course on global futures Rogers identified five overlapping dimensions of learning (Rogers, 1998).

Five Dimensions of Learning

The cognitive dimension - learning new facts about the global situation and its likely future consequences, traditionally considered the core of teaching about global issues. Resistance to this sometimes occurred because students felt cognitively overwhelmed, confused and pessimistic when faced with the complexities of world problems.

The affective dimension - students also experienced a range of conflicting emotions, such as: elation/depression, hopefulness/hopelessness, fear/courage. Grieving, it has been noted, is a common response to learning about global threats to human survival and in relation to processes of transition and change.

The existential dimension - learning about futures issues can also lead to deep soul-searching. For some this involved a questioning of their values, life-purposes, and lifestyles. At this level they were being faced with a reconstruction of their own sense of self, something which often occurs when embarking on a quest for deeper meaning and purpose in life.

The empowerment dimension - this centres around individual reso-

lution of the question 'Can one person make a difference?' In order to feel empowered students need to be able to envision positive future scenarios and learn about success stories which have clearly 'made a difference'.

The action dimension - if the questions raised by the first four dimensions have been satisfactorily resolved for the student then informed personal, social and political choices and action can occur. Some of Rogers' students reported that learning about global futures had lead to a significant re-orientation of their lives.

A UK Investigation

In the light of the above it was decided to monitor the impact on undergraduates of a first year course on Global Futures in a way that would also promote reflective learning. This course, which comes under the Faculty of Applied Sciences, focused on alternative futures, issues of sustainability, and action for change. Data was collected in three main ways: i) students kept a personal journal in which they made weekly entries in response to their lectures and seminars; ii) the group met on a monthly basis to share what they had written; and iii) at the end of the course time was spent reviewing what had gone on individually and collectively.

One student related the choice to study Global Futures to her own personal experiences.

I have seen the effects of deforestation on the environment, on indigenous populations...as well as the effect of Indonesian forest fires...I am concerned about this...Global Futures seems to offer the 'right mix' to enable me to find my own answers.

Another said that it was the description in the prospectus that caught his attention.

It seemed like an incredibly sensible course...I wanted to study something contemporary and moral, that would lead me into a life based on principles and not money.

At different times throughout the course each student was challenged by the complexity of the global issues they were studying. At the monthly

meetings, however, students were able to share with each other what they had written in their journals. They talked of their increasing awareness and how they felt more knowledgeable about the state of the world than their peers. As one student wrestled with so much disturbing new information she wondered if it was "maybe a mid-life crisis for me". Students also wrote about their experiences of sharing with each other in the research group.

Prominent this week were the inner feelings I discovered through talking with others in the group...it was good to learn how others were coping and how they shared similar concerns and experiences.

That studying global futures had an emotional impact on students was a common thread which ran through their journals and discussions. It was not always very overt, more a sub-theme, with a wide range of emotions being expressed. Words used included: denial, frightening, saddened, worrying, shocking, upsetting, overwhelmed, alarm, ashamed and disheartened. There were also strong positive emotions expressed with the words inspired, enthused, passionate, excitement and optimistic used to describe the way in which they had been influenced by some of the issues.

For me, the whole module is as much a continuation of my journey inwards as it is forwards. I am discovering a lot more about myself, and more often than not it is a painful journey...I am now more aware of certain issues and I have to take sides and not sit on the fence. To act requires courage...To be open we must drop our guard and be transparent about what we think and how we feel.

Comments at the conclusion of the year's investigation included the following.

I have learnt that I am more affected by the issues than I thought I would be. Some I have found very emotionally challenging and, at times, hard to deal with...I got a tremendous amount out of the research group, being able to share how I felt and learning about how others were affected was wonderful so early in my college time.

It added a different dimension to my life and made me more aware of my own self...at other times reflective journalling was a catharsis as I unburdened my thoughts and feelings and (it was) therefore therapeutic in its own way.

Some Reflections

It is clear that the process of learning about global futures had a significant impact on this group of students. Issues of wealth and poverty, unsustainability and sustainability are complex and can be quite overwhelming when first encountered, as the group indeed found. A major element of the impact on students was affective. Their responses ran the gamut from upset, worried and sad to frightened, alarmed and shocked. They also veered between pessimism and optimism and at other times they felt inspired, enthused, excited and passionate. These findings specifically parallel the experiences of the students described by Rogers.

The value of guided journalling and structured discussion was noted by everyone in the group. The monthly meetings added a further dimension because this provided an opportunity for shared reflection and 'thinking out loud'. In particular the group was marked by high levels of enthusiasm for learning, journal writing, group discussion and active sharing. The research group was thus also a very positive learning experience and as such greatly appreciated by the students involved.

Learning in schools and higher education is still largely treated as a cognitive affair, part of the Enlightenment heritage in which the cognitive is valorised over the affective, it thus becomes 'natural' for learners to resist the affective, or to see it as part of the personal domain, rather than an integral element in the educational process. At the very least futures studies and other fields relating to exploration of the human condition have cognitive, affective and existential dimensions. They also raise crucial questions about the possible role of education in promoting empowerment and action for change.

Some of the antidotes to these dilemmas have been noted by practitioners. Thus Huckle (1990) comments: "If we are not to overwhelm pupils with the world's problems, we should teach in a spirit of optimism. We should build environmental success stories into our curriculum and develop awareness of sources of hope in a world where new and appropriate technologies now offer liberation to all." Jones (1998) writes: "My own experience is that students get 'turned on' when they are empowered and challenged to come up with strategies to cope with and adapt to the forces of social and technological change ahead." And Kaza (1999) comments: "By leading people through a process of waking up to their own feelings for the world, the work releases bound energy which can then be engaged in positive effort."

*Becoming a Teacher**Education for Change*

All first year students in the Faculty of Education have to take an introductory module entitled Education for Change. This is their first introduction as new undergraduates to the wider world of education. The three main aims of the module are to: i) problematise the nature of education; ii) problematise the state of the world; and iii) examine the role of education in responding to contemporary global issues. Whilst later advanced modules are specifically available on environmental education, futures education and global citizenship this module plays a crucial role in sensitising new would-be teachers to a range of educational and societal issues. It is intended to whet their appetites and present a vision of education which is about changing both self and society (Richardson, 1990).

Whilst mature students make up a proportion of the new undergraduates many have come straight from school and their experience of education has been limited to their own schooling. 'Problematise education' means inducting them into the issues and debates that underlie different notions of education. They are surprised to find that both philosophers and political ideologies differ fundamentally over the purposes and processes of education. Is its purpose for people to learn their place in society, to get high examination grades, to get a good job, to provide the country with a skilled workforce or to bring out the best in each individual? Do schools merely replicate the inequities in the wider community or can they be used as a tool to help change society for the better?

'Problematise the state of the world' means introducing students to selected current global trends and issues and demonstrating that the local and global are inextricably connected. It also means beginning to raise questions about global inequality and injustice, and issues of human and environmental well-being. Students are generally shocked to learn of the nature and extent of environmental problems or of third world debt. Whilst some may have learnt about such issues at school many have not.

The final part of the module look at how educators over the last thirty years have responded in innovative ways to teaching about global issues. In particular examples of good practice and socially critical pedagogy are drawn from the field of global education. Since the national curriculum in England and Wales now contains references to global citizenship (Hicks, 2000) and education for sustainable development these

fields have a crucial role to play in supporting teachers in their work. Students learn these things not as an afterthought but as part of their primary induction into the world of education.

In order to introduce the notion of reflective learning students are required to keep a seminar folder in which they record each week what has interested them most and what they feel they have learnt. Whilst this generally begins as a descriptive process by the latter part of the module students are beginning to develop analytical skills, drawing different threads together and posing questions they wish to research for themselves through further reading. In the weekly seminars particular attention is paid to developing discussion skills, co-operative group skills and the ability to reflect on one's own attitudes and values. Content and method are thus seen as inextricably related. Problematising education and the world necessarily requires a teaching and learning process which encourages self-reflection, critical awareness and a growing confidence in being able to identify one's own and others' ideological perspectives.

Student responses

How do students respond to such a module? Most are very appreciative of this module as shown by the high attendance rates throughout. In her evaluation of the course one student wrote: "All the lectures have been very interesting (and) the best I didn't want to leave." Having to make weekly entries in the seminar folder was felt to be a worthwhile activity and another student commented: "The seminar reports really made me realise what I had actually learnt. It was a good way of actually getting us to teach ourselves." When asked their thoughts on the module overall responses included: "I didn't think education could be this exciting!" and "This is definitely an inspiring module which has encouraged me to pursue my career goals with increasing passion."

One of the final sessions of this introductory module is specifically on futures education. Here is how one student responded to this.

I think that both this week's lecture and the module as a whole have taught me one very important thing which I hope to bear in mind throughout my training and practise as a teacher. What it has made me realise is the responsibility and duty that educators have to prepare children to live and participate in a world which is rapidly changing, and which will continue to change in the new millennium.

Both the lecture and reading highlighted the importance of incorporating a global and futures perspective in the curriculum, in order for it to

be relevant for the children of today and tomorrow. Prior to commencing this course, I have to admit to having thought of education as simply teaching children subjects such as maths, English and science. My eyes have been opened to many aspects of education which I had never previously considered, and which I feel will be invaluable to me, both as a prospective teacher and as 'global citizen' in the 21st century.

Another student commented that:

It is hard to see how a subject could be devoted to teaching the future to children but I could see, as with many approaches, how it could fit into some subject areas. It was interesting to see how the media and other influences encourage children to think about the future in the way that they do and I think that this is another element that I will have to consider when I am teaching. I also found it daunting to think that my influence will be on children for many years ahead after their formal education has finished. The lecture made me think about my own education and how this has prepared me for the future.

Over the last decade much of teacher training in the UK has taken a narrow subject focus based on a utilitarian and technocentric approach to education. These comments show, however, that student teachers are interested in deeper issues and that they respond with interest to the notion that their training should include a global and futures perspective as well as the expectation that they should reflect critically on this.

Exploring Life Changes

A research project

Over the last six years I have also been involved in an on-going research project exploring images of the future in postmodern times. This has investigated young people's views of the future (Hicks & Holden, 1995), how students and educators envision their preferable futures (Hicks, 1998a), contemporary sources of hope (Hicks, 1998b) and reflections on the millennium. During the latter investigation I was particularly struck by the way in which people's views of the future vary with age. How the future looks to someone in their twenties or thirties is different to someone in their forties or fifties. It seemed that this probably applied to both personal and societal futures and I wanted to ex-

plore this in more depth.

My focus was sharpened further as a result of reading Sheehy's (1998) *Passages in Men's Lives: New Directions for Men at Midlife*. This not only focused on a particular phase in the life course but also highlighted the importance of gender differences in conceptualising life-changes. Given the current attention being paid to changing notions of masculinity in western countries (Segal, 1997; Clare, 2000) it seemed that this twin focus would be rewarding to explore. It is also worth noting that whilst feminist futures have begun to make some impact on futures studies (Milojevic, 1998) issues of age and gender have hitherto been relatively neglected within the field.

The following invitation to a residential focus group weekend was thus sent to a small number of men, all of whom had shown an interest in such issues.

The Changing Vision: Men in Mid-Life

The purpose

How do our visions of the future change as our lives unfold? How, in particular, do men's perceptions of time, life and society change as they near or enter their 50s - 'half a hundred years' as the Chinese poet Li Po called it. The first spring of the new century feels an appropriate time to consider such questions. This weekend will provide an opportunity to explore and record how men's views of the future change with ageing, particularly in relation to our own hopes and aspirations.

The Questions

- Where have we come from as men? ~ reviewing past achievements and the dreams that brought us to this place.
- Where are we now as men? ~ assessing where we have got to and what we have learnt from our changing life experiences.
- Where do we want to get to as men? ~ contemplating the next phase of life through renewal of our values and visions.
- What does it mean to 'bless one's life history as something that had to be' and how might we do this?
- And is it true that 'most men want to feel before they die that they have made a difference'?
- What does it mean to be a man on the threshold of this new millennium? In what way is manhood 'on trial'?

- Together we can support each other in reflection on these questions and find insight and courage to renew our visions.

The brief account that follows highlights some of the main themes that emerged from this event. It should be stated straight away that by focusing on the life course itself the overarching concept became that of time, i.e. the interrelationships between time past, present and future, rather than an exploration of the future per se. This highlights, I think, the way in which conceptualisation of futures shifts depending on whether the context is personal, local, societal or global. By focusing on the individual a more embodied notion of future is called forth which cannot easily be separated from the lived experience of age and ageing.

Experiences of Mid-life

Members of the group ranged in age from 40 to 60 and, as part of the focus group process, were asked to keep a journal record of their thoughts and experiences during the weekend. In talking and writing about the experiences of 'mid-life' three main themes emerged: what had been lost, what had been gained, and the ambiguities that remained.

There was a sense of regret or loss amongst participants over that which had passed in their lives and would not come again. In essence this was about lost time, youth and early manhood, when the future was not yet shaped and seemed so full of untold possibility. At the same time there was a realisation of what had been gained on the journey into mid-life. Whilst life choices might now feel more limited there was often a feeling of greater rootedness and grounding in life. There was a feeling that life's experiences had also brought many benefits often relating, for example, to greater self-knowledge. As one participant wrote:

I like myself more now than I did when I was younger...the person I am now is more rounded, more self-aware, less aggressive and a lot less arrogant...its as if the rough edges have been knocked off as the great stone-polisher of life has ground me down but also revealed much more of my unique beauty.

At the same time there was still sometimes a sense of unfinished business or a loss of direction for participants and, in particular, a sense of time running out.

In order to look more deeply at notions of manhood in the early 21st

century the group shared the 'lessons' they felt they had learned from their fathers. For most men these fell into three broad groupings: i) the importance of work, of being the breadwinner, of being in charge; ii) that fathers are often distant, inaccessible or invisible; iii) that manners, courteousness, honour and ethics really matter. At the same time the group also shared the things that their fathers had failed to teach them. Most men felt that they had not been taught anything about: i) sex, intimacy and relationships; ii) that life is difficult; iii) how to feel good about oneself as a man.

This then lead on to discussion about generational differences amongst men. What their fathers had passed on reflected patterns of masculinity in the mid-20th century which were unconscious of the historical nature of patriarchy and its crushing disbenefits to both men and women. Participants commented on how much they had painfully learnt, often through uncomfortable questions raised by feminists, about the nature of institutionalised gender inequity at home, in the workplace and in society. "Working with active feminists," wrote one man, "helped me to review all my assumptions, attitudes and behaviour, and enabled me to gain respect for the many who were working in the equal opportunities field". There was, therefore, a feeling that manhood is very much on trial because this generation has the responsibility to make conscious that which men have studiously ignored for generations - their role in reproducing and benefiting from patriarchal culture.

For men in mid-life the future therefore raises some crucial questions. The first is to do with a greater sense of mortality and an awareness of the approach of death whether this may be close or distant. There is a sense of time running out and existential questions about how best to handle this can become increasingly pressing. Secondly, and related, the future raises questions about how best to balance one's life. Participants spoke, for example, about wanting to get the balance right between becoming and doing, and between comfort and adventure. So, faced by a sense of time running out, there is often a strong need to readjust the balance of things. People talked of wanting to celebrate life more, to go deeper into things, to be more visible, to make their mark, to contribute to the healing of the earth.

This research project was specifically designed to aid reflective practice because only from that can come deeper awareness of self and society. All participants commented on the value of keeping a journal and sharing in small groups. There was a growing awareness of the commonality of men's struggles and the empowerment that comes from men bearing

witness to this. As one wrote:

Reflecting on my own journey, witnessing other men's stories at mid-life has been immensely encouraging and reassuring. I feel more confident, clearer and more ready for the next step. Mid-life is not something to be endured (as I had thought). I have seen that I have more resources than I thought, I am richer in experience than I realised, I have more in common with other men than I had imagined. This has been a soulful place, a necessary chance to reflect on what lies behind me and what I choose ahead.

This study, whilst small in scale, confirms the major issues of identity facing men in the 21st century, it also highlights the reappraisals that mid-life can bring and how these affect the individual's view of the future. It also explicitly supports the value and importance of a pedagogy which encourages reflective practice.

In conclusion

Each of these case studies illustrates the crucial interrelationship between medium and message in the learning context. Didactic and mechanistic approaches to education ignore the reflexivity that lies at the heart of the human condition. By using techniques such as structured journalling, small group discussion and experiential learning, students are encouraged to become more critically aware of both self (personal and professional) and society (local and global). A reflective and socially critical pedagogy is essential to futures studies, and similar fields of enquiry, precisely because it does problematise - rather than take for granted - the whole human endeavour.

Whilst these case studies each have a different focus - learning about global futures, training to be a teacher, and reflecting on mid-life - they all raise important questions for those involved in futures studies. These questions relate to hitherto relatively neglected areas of concern which need to become more central if futures studies is to truly meet the needs of the 21st century. They are as follows:

- Where is the literature on exploring futures within education as against the futures of education?
- How should practitioners of global/futures education respond to the affective and existential impact of their subject matter?

- What does a futures perspective within teacher education look like and how can this be more widely promoted?
- Where is the literature on images of the future which looks at differences arising from age, gender, class and ethnic grouping?
- Why does futures studies have little to say about the question of pedagogy when its very subject matter requires both a socially critical and reflective stance?

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