Reclaiming the Future: What Every Educator Needs to Know

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The children we teach in school now will spend most of their lives in the 21st century. Those leaving school in the 1990s will become the parents, voters, workers, business people and visionaries of tomorrow. If all education is for the future, where is the future in education? How are we preparing the students for those responsibilities? How are we helping them to think more critically and creatively about the future?

My argument is that as educators, and particularly as environmental educators, we need to engage in the task of 'reclaiming the future'. I will illustrate this with reference to: i) the approaching millenium; ii) the need to educate more explicitly **for** the future; iii) the importance of being able to envision more just and sustainable futures; and iv) some thoughts on moving forwards.

Approaching the millennium

A symbolic threshold

When I began teaching about global issues in the late-60s I can remember asking my students to work out how old they would be in the year 2000. The date seemed very remote, but important, and even then symbolic as some sort of turning point. Now it is much closer and even more compelling, this culture=bound temporal co-ordinate. When we reach the year 2000, or to be more precise 2001, the last decade of the century turns into the first, the 20th century changes into the 21st, and the second millennium into the third. These are powerful metaphors of change.

In the biblical millennium heaven could only be established on earth after the final clash between good and evil and for some the modern millennium prompts similar questions – will it be the Golden Age or the Apocalypse?

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us …

The opening paragraph of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* was written to describe the 1790s. It could equally have been written about the 1990s.

What the millennium can provide is a mirror for the deep human need we have to make historical sense of both personal and cultural change. It is well suited to do this being a rare event in recorded human history. Once an event is perceived as a turning point or threshold it often becomes invested with a symbolic power which heightens the quest for new meaning and new beginnings. When and where in our teaching, I wonder, do we encourage students to share *their* feelings about this time?

Earth in the balance

In 1992, just before the 'Earth Summit' in Rio, the *Guardian* ran the headline 'Earth's future in the balance, say top scientists'. It referred to a joint report from the US National Academy of Sciences and the 'normally-conservative' Royal Society of London, which warned of the catastrophic consequences of resource consumption, environmental destruction and population growth.

> In essence, the two bodies – to which both governments have always turned for advice on scientific matters – have endorsed many of the warnings issued over the past 20 years by pressure groups such as Friends of the earth and Greenpeace, making it difficult for politicians to say scientific opinion is divided, or that talk of global disaster is scaremongering. (Guardian, 1992)

Twenty years ago the 'limits of growth' debate was sparked off by publication of the first report from the Club of Rome. The authors of that report, which predicted global collapse if present trends continued, have now published a sequel called *Beyond the Limits* (Meadows, 1992). Whilst they argue that the world has already overshot some limits, they also show that a sustainable future *is* technically and economically feasible. When and where in our teaching do we encourage students to debate such issues?

Thinking about the future

We spend a large part of our time thinking about the future. Identifying our goals for the future enhances our ability to work in the present, adds to our motivation and helps give us direction. Whilst on the one hand the future is intangible, it is also of crucial importance, human existence cannot be conceived of without it.

Yet because there are no facts about the future we often neglect it or leave it to others: management, economists, politicians, multinational corporations, and its *their* future that we finish up with. We often know what we *don't* want in the future, but may be less clear about what we *do* want. We are also more used to thinking about personal rather than societal or global futures.

The times now require that we think much more explicitly about the future and about how local and global futures are interrelated. In particular we need to ask the questions, where are we going and where do we want to go, locally, nationally and globally? Nearly twenty years ago Alvin Toffler (1974) wrote:

> All education springs from images of the future and all education creates images of the future. Thus all education, whether so intended or not, is a preparation for the future. Unless we understand the future for which we are preparing we may do tragic damage to those we teach.

Indeed there is no such thing as the future (singular), for at any given moment in time any number of futures (plural) are possible. The term 'alternative futures' or simply 'futures' is thus often used as a shorthand reminder of this.

For an exploration of alternative futures to be of use it needs to be remembered that different people and groups have quite different views of the future: a middle class child in Perth, a homeless woman in London, an unemployed worker in Dresden or a logger in Brazil. Clearly some groups in society also have much more power than others to define the future, generally those who are rich in the global system or who wield power through, say, transnational corporations, international banking, governments, the military, the media. In some sense such groups also colonise the future, particularly big business with its constant creation of new 'needs' for tomorrow.

What we expect in the future is often not what we would wish for. Helping pupils identify both their probably and preferable futures is an essential element of preparation of adult life. Teaching only about problems can alienate young people. Learning about possible alternatives and proposed solutions is much more likely to motivate them. The current state of the planet requires that exploration of just and sustainable futures becomes a major priority at all levels of society. If we can work to envision such futures with others then we stand a better chance of bringing them about. Future generations would surely ask no less of us than this.

Educating for the future
Children's interests
Research from the Henley Centre for Forecasting (1991) in the UK shows that young people in school are very aware of, and concerned about, global issues. In particular they see the environment as a key concern, with destruction of the ozone layer, deforestation, global warming, CFCs and endangered species as the problems most urgently requiring attention. Generally children show a high level of interest in environmental issues, with school lessons and projects being cited as their main source of information. However over 60% of the children surveyed still said they didn't think

enough was taught about the environment at school. They are very aware that the future holds both promise and threat.

Clarifying the rationale

In a society or time period where change occurs slowly it can generally be assumed that the future will be very similar to the present. However, in periods when change is much more rapid, the future becomes more uncertain and unpredictable. The 19th and 20th centuries have been just such a period, with rapid economic, technological and political change. We live in times of uncertainty and surprise. 'Now' is the place where we need to anticipate and prepare for the future before it unfolds.

The purpose of 'education for the future' is to enable pupils to explore various scenarios which may emerge from current trends and to explore the implications of these. Once we realise that we cannot 'opt out' of the future it takes on a radically new meaning. All actions and choices, including choices *not* to act or choose, have future consequences. Rick Slaughter (1985) writes:

> We cannot alter the past, but we have common interests in achieving life-preserving, sustainable futures. It follows that a central task for teachers is to explore with their pupils some of the major problems and possibilities that lie ahead and thereby sensitise them to the implications of choices and actions in the present.

Education for the future clarifies the range of alternatives, which then gives rise to wider choices, which can lead to more responsible action in the present. The rationale for including a clearer futures dimension in the curriculum would include the following points.

Table 1   Rationale for a futures dimension in the curriculum

1.   *Pupil motivation*
Pupil expectation about the future can affect behaviour in the present, e.g. that something is, or is not, worth working for. Clear images of desired personal goals can help stimulate motivation and achievement.

2.   *Anticipating change*
Anticipatory skills and flexibility of mind are important in times of rapid change. Such skills enable pupils to deal more effectively with uncertainty and to initiate, rather than merely respond to, change.

3.   *Critical thinking*
In weighing up information, considering trends and imagining alternatives, pupils will need to exercise reflective and critical thinking. This is often triggered by realising the contradictions between how the

world is now and how one would like it to be.

4. Clarifying values
All images of the future are underpinned by differing value assumptions
about human nature and society. In a democratic society pupils need to
be able to begin to identify such value judgements before they can
themselves make appropriate choices between alternatives.

5. Decision making
Becoming more aware of trends and events which are likely to influence
one's future and investigating the possible consequences of one's actions
on others in the future, leads to more thoughtful decision making in the
present.

6. Creative imagination
One faculty that can contribute to, and which is particularly enhanced
by, designing alternative futures is that of the creative imagination.
Both this **and** critical thinking are needed to envision a range of
preferable futures from the personal to the global.

7. A better world
It is important in a democratic society that young people develop their
sense of vision particularly in relation to more just and sustainable
futures. Such forward looking thinking is an essential ingredient in both
the preserving and improving of society.

8. Responsible citizenship
Critical participation in democratic life leads to the development of
political skills and thus more active and responsible citizenship. Future
generations are then more likely to benefit, rather than lose, from
decisions made today.

Trends for the future
Whilst on the one hand the future *is* unknown, one of the tasks of futurists is
to analyse social, political and economic trends and to try and gauge their
possible future impact on society. In that sense the major problems of today
will continue to be amongst the major issues of tomorrow. Some crucial
global trends are shown in Table 2. These are partly based on Naisbitt and
Aburdene's *Megatrends 2000* (1991). Their actual analysis of these trends, it
should be noted however, is often both shallow and ethnocentric.

Table 2   Some trends for the future

1. *Cultural diversity*
Whilst we are now all part of one global system, it is ethnic, cultural and historical differences amongst peoples that will increasingly influence national and global affairs in the future.

2. *The Pacific rim*
The centre of world trade is now shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific rim. Asian countries bordering the Pacific will become more important as they undergo the fastest period of economic expansion in history.

3. *Women in leadership*
Women are now increasingly taking up leadership roles in business, especially in the U.S. This trend is likely to spread and will have a significant impact on the way in which business is organised in the future.

4. *Biotechnology*
The new scientific frontier of genetic engineering is about to transform our lives, whether we like it or not. This includes both the creation of new plant and animal breeds as well as alteration of human genes.

5. *Religious revival*
There are now clear signs of a worldwide religious and spiritual revival. This ranges from the growth of fundamentalist and evangelical groups to the spread of New Age beliefs and a renaissance of more ancient spiritual traditions.

6. *Environmental concern*
Due to issues such as global warming and ozone depletion there is now an upsurge of popular interest in environmental issues, particularly in the rich world. Increasingly people are aware of the need to preserve and nurture the planet itself.

7. *Wealth and poverty*
The nature of the world economic system is such that the gap between the countries of the North and South will continue to increase. This growing division will create serious future problems both between and within countries.

8. *Changing worldviews*
In the West there are some signs of a new value shift away from a predominantly scientific and mechanistic view of the world to a more

holistic and ecological one. This can be seen in many fields of enquiry, from health care and the new physics to psychology and education.

When and where in our teaching do we encourage students to discuss the possible impact of such trends on their own lives, and on the lives of others, in the 21st century?

For those who would like to study the futures field more deeply I would recommend Warren Wagar's *The Next Three Futures: Paradigms of Things to Come* (1992) and Michael Marien's *What I Have Learned: Thinking About the Future Then and Now*, (1987). There are, of course, also specialist journals such as *Futures* and *Futures Research Quarterly*.

Envisioning the future
Images of the future
One of the most valuable distinctions that futurists often make is between probable and preferable futures. Probable futures are all those which seem *likely* to come about. They involve the projection of current trends, e.g. in relation to economic growth, unemployment or global warming, and making forecasts about what is therefore expected to happen. Preferable futures are all those which one feels *ought* to come about to achieve a particular set of value preferences. This involves envisaging, for example, what a more just and ecologically sustainable community or world might look like and the steps needed to bring it about.

Images of the future play a crucial role in the development of human life and culture. Contemporary society cannot be explained simply as the result of the *push* of the past, it is also deeply influenced by the *pull* of the future offering new and exciting possibilities. As Rick Slaughter (1991a) writes:

> Images of the future present us with options and possibilities from which we can select and choose or with which we may argue and debate. Either way, they are active, shaping components of human consciousness. The main purpose of considering futures, and images of futures, is not to predict what will happen in any hard or precise sense... it is ... to discern the wider ground from which images are constituted so as to take an active part both in creating and nurturing those which seem worthwhile.

In the mid-1950s Fred Polak, the Dutch sociologist, wrote a major study of images of the future in Western society. he put forward the thesis that certain images of the future can develop an unusual potency and act as a societal time-bomb, creating what he called a 'breach in time'. Radically new visions of the future, he argued, can produce a sharp temporal and historical discontinuity (Polak, 1972). Faced with new and potent images of the

possible future society begins to mobilise its creative energies in response.

But what Polak also chronicled was that a lack of guiding images can lead to a loss of direction and purpose in society. In particular he argued that there was a decline of imaging capacity in Western society, that in the mid-20th century compelling positive images of the future were few and far between. The experiences of the First World War, the Second World War, and then the advent of the Cold War, made the future not a place of hope but one of fear. The long tradition of utopia gave way to one of anti-utopia, or dystopia, exemplified by Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

It is still almost impossible to watch television or go to the cinema without being faced by images of disaster, breakdown and despair. At some deep level we are haunted by these themes yet sense that something is missing. What is missing are positive guiding images of the future which can give both direction and the confidence that things *can* be radically different.

Desirable futures

What the futures field can offer is a wealth of expertise in exploring more desirable futures. it is as important to know where we *want* to get to as where we do not. As Robin Richardson (1989) commented:

> A map without utopia on it, it has been said, is not worth consulting...
> Admittedly there are disadvantages in dreams and ideals, the
> disadvantages of unreality and abstractions. But frequently it also
> clears and strengthens your mind if you venture to dream for a while,
> as concretely and as practically as possible, about the ideal situation
> to which all your current efforts are, you hope directed.

This brings us back to Polak's thesis that without strong positive guiding images of the future a society loses its directions. We now need to be clear about what we *want* in the future as well as what we oppose.

Some of the most interesting work on envisioning preferable futures has been done by Warren Ziegler (1989) in the U.S. who has worked with town planners, senior executives, hospital boards and educators and others. He points out that the process takes us into often neglected areas of learning where the emphasis is on the emotional/affective and the intuitive mode, rather than the cognitive/analytic.

Elise Boulding worked with Ziegler to design and run a series of workshops on 'imaging a world without weapons'. Both had been influenced by Polak's work and concluded that 'if parties in conflict could visualise a future situation in which their conflict had been successfully managed, they would be (better) able to deal with their differences in the present in the light of that perceived future' (Boulding, 1988a).

In describing the outcomes of such workshops Boulding notes that participants often wish to be 'realistic' and begin by assuming that their fears are realistic whilst their hopes are not. The preferable futures envisioned often share several features in common. The world described is frequently non-hierarchical, one in which a sense of locality is strong, where technology is important but low profile. Another striking image she reports is the recurrent use, especially amongst young people, of the adjectives *bright, clean* and *green* (Boulding, 1988b).

A quite different style of workshop, pioneered by Joanna Macy, (1991) focuses on the need first to acknowledge and then work with the feelings of pain and distress that participants experience over the state of the planet. She argues that real empowerment and action on behalf of future generations cannot occur until this deep pain is first fully experienced and shared with others. This parallels the therapist's task of working with her client to express and release repressed fear and anger. When buried pain is thus unblocked creative energy becomes available for new tasks.

The utopian tradition

Every culture has its image, whether religious or secular, of a past or future better world: Eden, Arcadia, the Golden Age, Paradise. In Western thought this aspiration became known as utopia, a term coined by Thomas More in 1516 and based on a pun in Greek: 'eutopia', the good place, was also 'utopia', no place. Utopias provide blueprints for a better future society and may be presented as fiction, an ideal society set in some other time or place, or as a programme for political action and change.

Utopias always have a double-edged message: a critique of present imperfections and a vision of a better world. Literary utopias range from Plato's *Republic* to William Morris's famous *News from Nowhere* and Charlotte Gilman's *Herland*. Various groups in Europe, North America and Australia have planned and set up their own utopian communities with varying degrees of success. In Britain, for example, Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in the 17th century, religious groups such as the Shakers in the 18th century, and secular communities such as Robert Owen's New Harmony in the 19th.

As Krishan Kumar (1991) writes 'Utopia's value lies not in its relation to present practice but in its relation to a possible future. Its'"practical" use is to overstep the immediate reality to depict a condition whose clear desirability draws us on, like a magnet.' The utopian tradition, both as literature and as lived experience, has constantly inspired critical action for change and can provide a rich source of nourishment for the creative imagination today.

Moving forwards
Other voices

We live in one world that contains many other voices telling of the future, voices that the dominant culture may often ignore. Here are four such voices.
From Yothu Yindi's (1992) new album *Tribal Voice*:

> Well I heard it on the radio/ And I saw it on the television/ Back in 1988, all those talking politicians/ Words are easy, words are cheap/ Much cheaper than our priceless land/ But promises can disappear/ Just like writing in the sand/ This land was never given up/ This land was never bought and sold/ The planting of the Union Jack/ Never changed our law at all/ Now two rivers run their course/ Separated for so long/ I'm dreaming of a brighter day/ When the waters will be one.

Eduardo Galeano, (1991) the Uruguayan writer:

> There is just one place where yesterday and today meet, recognise each other and embrace, and that place is tomorrow. Certain voices from the American past, long past, sound very futuristic. For example, the ancient voice that still tells us we are children of the earth ... (and) that speaks to us of community heralds another world as well. Community – the communal mode of production and life – is the oldest of American traditions ... It belongs to the earliest days and the first people, but it also belongs to the times ahead and anticipates a New World. For there is nothing less alien to these lands of ours than socialism. Capitalism, on the other hand, is foreign: like smallpox, like the flu. It came from abroad.

Vandana Shiva (1989) on women, ecology and development:

> Seen from the experience of Third World women, the modes of thinking and action that pass for science and development, respectively, are not universal and humanly inclusive, as they are made out to be; modern science and development are projects of male, western origin, both historically and ideologically ... The industrial revolution converted economics from the prudent management of resources for sustenance and basic needs satisfaction into a process of commodity production for profit maximisation ... The new relationship of man's domination and mastery over nature was thus also associated with new patterns of domination and mastery over women, and their exclusion from participation as partners in both science and development.

And Eleonora Masini, (1987) on women as builders of the future:

> Women are better adapted for the change from the industrial society
> to a new society, because women are not the carriers of the values of
> the preceding industrial society. As they were not the builders of the
> future in the preceding society, they may become the builders of the
> future in a different society. As they were invisible in the industrial
> society, women may become visible and constructive in a post-
> industrial society.

When and where in our teaching do we encourage students to listen to such
voices and to draw on such traditions?

Sustainable futures
Traditional models of development and ideas of progress narrowly focus on
economic growth (GNP as a measure of consumption) with its intrinsic
discounting of other 'costs'. Thus some people benefit at the expense of
others; people benefit at the expense of the environment; and people today
benefit at the expense of future generations. Such development is not
sustainable because globally more people are getting poorer, finite resources
are diminishing and the environment is beginning to suffer irreversible
damage. As Lester Brown (1992) comments:

> Put simply, the global economy is rigged against both poverty
> alleviation and environmental protection. Treating the earth's
> ecological ills as separate from issues of debt, trade, inequality, and
> consumption is like trying to treat heart disease without addressing a
> patient's obesity and high cholesterol diet: there is no chance of
> lasting success.

Working towards a sustainable future requires production planned to meet
human needs together with a more just distribution of resources (Milbrath,
1989). It means reducing the harmful effects of industry and new technology,
challenging company policies which are dangerous to people and the
environment, stopping aid programmes which are inappropriate and
damaging, reducing overconsumption and waste, restraining population
growth, distinguishing clearly between wants and needs, and organising
locally, nationally and internationally for appropriate change. When and
where do we encourage our students to explore the need for, and nature of,
sustainable development in both the local and global community?

The education we need
Educating for the future draws on two long-standing educational traditions.
The first is the humanistic learner-centred tradition which focuses on the

development and fulfilment of each individual. The second is concerned with building greater equality in society by challenging and transforming existing inequalities of race, gender, class and disability.

> Both traditions are concerned with wholeness and holistic thinking, but neither, arguably, is complete without the other. There cannot be wholeness in individuals independently of strenuous attempts to heal rifts and contradictions in wider society and in the education system. Conversely, political struggle to create wholeness in society – that is, equality and justice in dealings and relationships between social classes, between countries, between ethnic groups, between women and men – is doomed to no more than partial successes and hollow victories, at best, if it is not accompanied by, and if it does not in its turn strengthen and sustain, the search for wholeness and integration in individuals. (Richardson, 1990)

The five questions I have asked in this article, see Table 3, can all contribute to our 'reclamation of the future'.

Table III   When and where in my teaching ...

When and where in my teaching do I encourage students to:

1. Share their feelings about the future as the third millennium approaches?
2. Learn about the crucial environmental and development issues which were debated at the recent 'Earth Summit'?
3. Discuss the possible future impact of current global trends on their lives in the 21st century?
4. Listen to a range of different voices on the future, utopian and feminist, indigenous and Third World?
5. Explore the need for, and nature of, sustainable development both in the local and global community?

Valuable support for such work in schools and teacher education is available from the Global Futures Project (Hicks, 1993a; Hicks, 1993b); Rick Slaughter (1991b) at the University of Melbourne and Noel Gough (1993) At Deakin University; the Imagine the Future project in Melbourne; the future studies network of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association; and publications from the Australian Commission for the Future such as *21C*.
      John Huckle (1990) writes:

> As the environmental problems resulting from prevailing forms of development and underdevelopment worsen, the pressure from

technocentric environmental management is likely to intensify along with more calls for 'education *about* the environment'. Environmental and social educators can use the resulting opportunities to introduce elements of 'education *for* the environment' which consider the real roots of environmental issues, and allow reflection and action on genuine social and environmental alternatives. The struggle for such education in schools resembles that for more socially useful and sustainable production and development in the wider world. Both are ultimately struggles for democracy, justice and well-being, on which our future relationships with one another and with planet earth depend.

This is where we need to begin, with a socially critical approach to learning that recognises the importance of changing both self and society. It requires 'the courage to admit and bear the pain of the present world'" whilst at the same time 'keeping a steady eye on (our) vision of a better future' (Meadows, 1992).

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