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WHAT ABOUT FORESIGHT LITERACY? EQUIPPING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN UNKNOWN FUTURES.

Abstract

In education, there is much rhetoric about a school's capacity to prepare learners for 'the future'. For example, there have been 'Schools of the future', 'Lighthouse schools of the future' and many claims from schools around the world that their roles encompass 'educating students for the future' and developing 'citizens of the future'. However, as 'futures educators', the questions must be asked: 'whose future?' and 'what future?'. Considering texts which promote this educational premise require tools and philosophical understandings, in order to deconstruct and articulate the future for which we prepare our young. This paper describes the way in which foresight literacy can be developed through engagement with explicit futures education tools and concepts. It highlights a number of futures texts indiscriminately presented within culture and society, and exposes some of the ways in which foresight (futures) understandings can be achieved. This reading, writing and articulation of a multiplicity of futures is referred to as foresight literacy. This paper does not address the 'future of literacy', but rather the way in which futures education equips students to engage with texts assuming, and describing a future.

Paper

Educational publications talk about the role of schools in developing citizens of the future. In some cases, the futures aspirations are explicitly articulated, as in the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (Department for Education, 2002, p. 102), Queensland's New Basics (Education Queensland & Curriculum Council (QSCC), 2001) and Tasmania's Essential Learnings (Department of Education Tasmania, 2002). Such explicit teaching, about multiple futures, leads to what I will refer to as foresight literacy - the ability to conceptualise, interpret, critique and employ what we learn, to enact possible, probable and preferable futures. Pedagogy which develops and enacts foresight literacy is commonly referred to as futures education.

Foresight

In order to conceptualise, interpret and critique possible future scenarios, we utilise foresight. Slaughter (2004) in Knowledge Base of Futures defines foresight as a "universal human capacity which allows people to think ahead and consider, model, create, respond to-, future eventualities. . . (it includes the practice of) futures methodologies, organisational developments and social innovations". Hayward (2004) suggests that foresight is an attribute in the development of consciousness. In particular, he talks about instinct and emotion.
as being a means by which we experience ourselves in the present, and that in moving beyond the 'now' we begin to be more imaginative in exploring many possibilities. In the time that we use to make a decision about appropriate futures, we utilise foresight as part of the process in considering the outcomes of those choices.

In futures, a key frame of reference for discourse is the foresight principle. Slaughter (1995) described it visually in *Tools and Techniques*. He uses the metaphor of driving a car, in that, whilst you are focussed on moving forward (future), it is important to keep checking your side and rear vision mirrors (past, present – temporal scanning). Hayward (2004) suggests that foresight "is mediated by the historical, cultural and social milieu in which it is practiced". He suggests that foresight includes the capacity to imaginatively represent the world and encourages reflection, learning and evaluation within the learner and choices he/she will make. Polak (1973, p. 129) said that to be "foresightful is to be a citizen of two worlds, the present and imagined". Drawing on the rich past, and scanning a range of presents, the ability to think about the future becomes more meaningful, possible and empowering.

The development of foresight literacy in schools

For the purpose of this paper, I will describe literacy as being "the ability to communicate by reading, speaking, listening and viewing" (Department of Education, 2000), as reflected within Australian curriculum documents. Emerging technologies are providing new challenges in the area of literacy, "with new technologies come also new genres and new opportunities to learn about the world" (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997). Innovative developments in multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999), 'learning by design' (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005) and a broadening of the scope of literacy - visual, critical, digital literacies, multilinguals and multimodality - within schools come as a result of a 'changing world'. Lankshear and Bigum (1997) suggest that there cannot be literacy without technology. Curriculum initiatives, and the development of new technologies and literacies, are good examples of the way foresight is utilised to address the needs of learners who will lead in future generations. Foresight literacy, and the development of critical futures consciousness, is crucial to the development of proactive educators and educationalists.

How is foresight developed in schools? What does it mean, to 'think about the future'? And, what future is it that each of us think about? Foresight literacy, and subsequently 'futures fluency' (Schultz, 1998), is developed through the use of futures tools, concepts and knowledge bases. These are encapsulated in futures education - futures in education (Gidley, Bateman, & Smith, 2004). Futures perspectives are necessary, in education, as times continue to change. It is true that uncertainty will always remain an aspect of thinking about the future, however in order to make what is ahead more accessible, educators have a duty of care to develop foresight literacy regarding tools, concepts and understandings which empower students to live as shapers of their personal
and shared futures. The 'multiplicities of futures', for design and consideration, is a concept of futures education.

**Multiplicities of futures**

In order to engage with, or construct texts which are futures oriented, it is crucial, to investigate the futures students hold as their reference point, and to further expose them to alternate perspectives of these futures. When speaking of young people's views of the future a distinction must be made between 'personal futures' and their future images for their country or the world. Since the earliest studies of young people's views of the future, in the seventies, a dissonance has been found between what young people expect in their own lives and how they see the future of their country or the planet (Hicks, 1996; Johnson, 1987; Toffler, 1974). This dissonance is believed by many futurists to result from the continual bombardment of young people's imaginations by the media's presentation of negative, fearful collective futures (Eckersley, 1993; Gidley, 2000; Hutchison, 1996). To discuss the future as one idea is unmanageable. The future is unknown and will be affected by many contributing factors. As a big idea, the future is difficult to access and constructively think about. Futures education explicitly addresses three types of futures.

*Personal futures* engages a person in reflection about how he/she envisages the future, specifically for that person's lifetime. These futures consider aspects of human life, regarding health, education, professional life, economy, location, dreams, fears and aspirations. In this arena, a person draws upon his/her personal history and engages his/her understandings of the world in which he/she lives to critically identify, plan for and shape a range of forecasted futures. In this way, futures education may be observed as a means of constructive personal development, allowing individuals to challenge and explore futures perceived not only themselves but also others.

In considering *local futures*, a person (or people collectively) draws upon his/her/their understanding of their local environment and external resources to begin thinking about how this locality will look in alternate futures. In this arena, a local environment may be understood as many things: a school, a suburb, a state or province or even a continent. It is the aspect of futures education in which people begin to work collectively to envisage and engage in productive planning and discourse about the status of the community being focussed upon and possible futures that may be worked towards. Within a school, local futures provides an opportunity for the community connected to that school, including students, teachers, families, councils and other interested parties, to identify changes and continuities and work towards the most suitable scenario. It may form the basis of a shared community project.

*Global futures* invites participants to explore and understand the world in which they are personally and collectively living. It stimulates students' thinking about the 'big picture' and exploration of the deep structures of our world. These deep structures include an examination of our physical, spiritual and cognitive world,
and how they came to be the way they are presently. Explicitly, a variety of worldviews may be developed and explored. Building on from these deep structures is the understanding that we are connected to those who have come before us, and will be connected to those who come after us. Futures education promotes the idea that each of us, individually and collectively, has a role to play in identifying and contributing to the shaping of the world, which is our global community.

**A metalanguage for alternative scenarios we read and write in classrooms.**

It is most common in everyday vernacular to speak of 'the future' as if there were only one possible option as to how 'the future' might be. The futures field refers to a multiplicity of futures, and encourages thinking about the enactment (see enactivism, as discussed by Begg, 2002) at each level. 'Alternative scenarios' is the metalanguage futurists and futures educators use to talk about the variety of futures considered and identified by individuals and groups. Each future envisaged is referred to as a scenario. Our thinking about these scenarios is deepened and managed through the identification of how possible, probable or preferable these views of the future are. Possible, probable and preferable descriptors are referred to as the ‘3Ps’ in foresight literacy.

*Possible futures* is the entry level for thinking about what is possible for personal, local and global futures. Possibilities are only limited by the scope of the mind to imagine alternatives to those already suggested. In this way, every person who engages in futures thinking is able to provide a possibility. The possibilities are used in a variety of ways. A possibility is identified and 'backcasted' in order to conceptualise how such a scenario could/would occur. Such possibilities are informed by understandings of the present and past, and are challenged by the values and priorities held, individually and collectively. Who says that it is impossible for any futures scenario to be accounted for, or enacted?

A higher order skill of foresight literacy is the ability to discern *probable* futures. Using multiple texts, experiences and ways of knowing about the world, and how deep structures underpinning our world are envisaged, we can use a variety of critical strategies to gauge the likelihood of possible futures occurring. In mathematic literacy, we develop understandings in chance that some things are more likely than others. In futures education this language is also developed, and what makes one future more likely than another will be informed by a number of factors, such as environmental issues, financial issues, educative issues, governance, the local and global agendas and limits of humanity.

Preferable futures are those scenarios identified individually or collectively as ones which should be worked towards personally, locally or globally. And, as discussed in probable futures, what is recognised as preferable will be informed by a range of factors such as perceptions of the world, values held, and whether these scenarios are accessible and achievable. Many preferable local and
global futures are very strongly connected to many personal voices and scenarios. In preferable scenarios, futurists and futures educators deconstruct assumed futures in order to critically identify what it is that is required for future generations. Sir Thomas More, and many others since, identified a preferable future when he raised the concept of 'Utopia' (Adams, 1991).

Time as text . . . the notion of the extended present

Elise Boulding (Polak, 1973) discusses the notion of the extended present, traditionally a psychological concept published by Piaget (Harner, 1982; Piaget, 1969). Rather than describing the present as an instant moment, Boulding uses varying lengths of the time to view the world, as text, from different viewpoints. For example, she attempts to build connections between generations by highlighting the changes which occur within a person's 200 year present. She suggests that a child's natural extended present stretches from his/her grandparents through to the time when his/her grandchildren will be living. Narratives and recounts, are thus a rich tool in developing connections between generations, as living histories.

One of the main rationales of futures education is promoting learning which nurtures connectedness between personal lives, the lives of others and the physical environment in which each person, culture and community live. The extended present acknowledges the people who have come before us, and highlights the journeys those people have undertaken in contributing to the world as it is now, and has been for some time. The extended present does not assume that change will occur in the instant of a minute or a week, but allows people to manage reflective thinking and planning for changes in the world over a much larger time span. The extended present acknowledges a period of transition from has been to what will be.

Change, Continuities and Discontinuities

We cannot assume that the future will be entirely different from the world as it is today, or that it will be entirely the same. In identifying how future scenarios are deconstructed, futurists and futures educators draw upon a binary of changes and continuities. This binary is rich in asking students to examine events and processes which change and continue, over time. Events which do not continue are referred to as discontinuities. Change and continuities are present in thinking about personal, local and global futures. Hicks (1994) and Slaughter (1995) provide an overview of tools which can be used to critique, contrast and compare elements of culture and society. Materials, connected and necessary to student life worlds, are the most effective media with which to investigate changes occurring personally, locally and globally. For example, clothing, shelter, media, schooling, etc have both continued and changed.
Young people's views and visions of the future

"The future of the earth depends on the attitude of the community (both local and global). At present the earth is going downhill, if nothing changes there could be trouble. Most likely is that we'll reach a point and realise something must change. The question is whether this point will be too late or not" - a Year 12 student (Gidley, 1997, page unknown).

Research into young people's views of the future, in Australia in the 1980s and 90s, indicated deepening negativity and lack of hope and a sense of powerlessness (Eckersley, 1988, 1995; Hannan, Ferguson, Pollock, & Reeder, 1995; Wilson, 1989). The issues that loomed large as concerns for young people emerge as being predominantly the environment, the economy, unemployment, health issues (Gidley, 2002).

Resulting from such studies about the negativity, fears and feelings of powerlessness, Wilson (1989, p. 39) stressed the following recommendations:
• the importance of giving students the opportunity to create alternative scenarios and
• the necessity to work with empowerment of the youth to help them begin to feel that they can influence change in a positive way.

Foresight literacy empowers educators and students to engage with texts using critical futures perspectives. Hutchison's research (1994, p. 29) considered student engagement with these texts, and explored:
• young people's images of feared futures: an uncompassionate world; a physically violent world; a divided world; a mechanised world; an environmentally unsustainable world; and a politically corrupt and deceitful world
• young people's images of preferred futures: technocratic dreaming (or techno fix solutions) especially from the boys; greening of science and technology, more common among the girls; imagining intergenerational equity and making peace with people and planet
• linking images of the world with action-planning.

Hutchinson's research supports the need to broaden literacies in schools through pro-social skills and affective/imaginative learning styles. He also found that young people struggled to find 'preferred futures' images yet were more fluid and extensive when it came to their fears about the future. This difficulty with creating fluid positive images of 'preferred futures' was not present with students educated in a more artistic, imaginative style (Gidley, 2002).

Effects of age differences on futures images

A project in the UK studied the futures images and texts with which children aged from 7 to 18 years engaged. Hicks' and Holden's research (1995) considers how 'the optimism of the 7 year old is transformed into the pessimism of the 18 year old'. They described the following futures perspectives as articulated by each age group:
• The 7 year olds are the most optimistic, that life for people all over the world will get better. They are ambivalent about whether poverty or pollution will be alleviated. They are the most optimistic of all age groups, feeling that life will be better for themselves and for others (p. 100).
• The 11 year olds reflect a commitment to improving the environment and to learning about global issues. It seems highest at this age. Although they are less optimistic than the younger children that social conditions will improve, they nevertheless hold a naïve belief that everyone is concerned about improving the planet and they would like to be a part of this (p.102).
• The 14 year olds are less optimistic than 11 year olds about world conditions improving and are ambivalent about whether they can do anything themselves to help make the world a better place (p. 103).
• The 18 year olds are the least positive about conditions improving either locally or globally... Although some 18 year olds gave examples of action they take to effect change, many are sceptical of the influence they can have. They are aware of a system 'out there' which influences people's lives but do not see themselves as part of that process (p. 104).

The appropriation of metalanguage within foresight literacy

"A common symptom of the token use of futures concepts is the uncritical reiteration of clichés and stereotypes "(Gough, 1990, p. 300). Smith (Gidley et al., 2004) notes that the word ‘future’ or ‘futures’ is beginning to become more common in educational discourse. She suggests that much of this may be just a superficial appropriation of the futures terminology without recourse to the research and knowledge base of futures studies. This ‘fashion statement’ futures (Gidley, 2002) gives the illusion that futures issues are being addressed by educators, when in fact it is only the most 'cursory tokenism'. These same concerns were expressed over ten years ago by Gough (1990) in a critical examination of ways in which futures were conceptualised at that time in the language of Australian education.

Gough (1990) spoke of three main ways that futures had entered educational discourse:
Tacit futures - by this he refers to the 'temporal asymmetry' of educational discourse whereby 'the temporal categories of past and present receive far more frequent and explicit attention' (even in documents purporting to be about 'Future Directions in ...Education') (p. 301).
Token futures – referring to 'the invocation of futures concepts and terminology for purposes which are chiefly rhetorical or where they are part of a rationalisation of choices, decisions or judgements which may, in fact, have been made on other grounds.' He cites Victorian curriculum documents which use 'Education for the Future' in their titles but whose only references to the future are in fact 'cliché-ridden superfluities'... 'a kind of tokenism – a rhetorical boost to economic rationalism' (p. 302-3).
Taken-for-granted futures - The major recurring themes that Gough noted to be part of the futures discourse of this time (even within the futures movement itself) were exemplified by a major information kit compiled by the Australia's Commission for the Future. Titled *Future Options*, Gough's critique is that it didn't inform Australians about all possible options but only those options presented by scientific and technological development. Gough demonstrated how much of the other rhetoric at that time concerning futures in Australian education 'took for granted' the prospect (and the desirability) of an education-led economic recovery (p. 304-6).

Futures fluency and foresight literacy

"Imagination is by necessity a foundation of futures research: there are no future facts. What information we do have about the future comes from our records of the past, our observations of the present, and our imaginative ability to ask, 'What if'" (Schultz, 1998, on CD-rom). Futures fluency is defined as 'proficiency and delight in creative, critical and constructive uses of rigorously imaginative speculation' (Schultz, 1998 on CD-rom). Shultz speaks of five cornerstone activities and discusses the relevant futures tools that underpin each of them:

- Identifying and monitoring change which is best developed through emerging issues analysis (also known as environmental scanning).
- Critiquing the impacts of change, which relies on the futures tool known as impact analysis.
- Imagining alternative futures which involves incasting (the deductive forecasting of alternative possible futures).
- Envisioning preferred futures or ideals which involves visioning (an imaginative, idealistic or normative process which aids people in explicitly articulating their preferred future).
- Planning and implementing/achievement phase involves backcasting which bridges the gap between events in a possible future (usually a preferred future) and the extended present.

Finally, after the five stages are complete, there is a return to the beginning, to identify, review and monitor any change that has occurred.

A case study of foresight literacy being developed

Wooranna Park Primary School in Dandenong, Victoria has been engaging in futures/foresight thinking, with regard to planning for teaching and learning in their Year 5/6 Autonomous Learning Unit (ALU). The school is committed to innovative and cutting edge practice, in order to cater for an extremely diverse multicultural and lower socio-economic clientele. Under a resourceful principal, the school has applied for funding to engage in a variety of projects, and as a result has access to advanced technological resources for students to employ in representing learning. For example, one mode of representing work is film-making (multimodal texts), which is supported by two studios with necessary materials.
For all their innovation, teachers had not considered a futures perspective in their classrooms, and initially were quite sceptical in their outlook, about how they could do this, and how their students would respond. As a project, we collaborated weekly, in planning learning design, and I offered ongoing futures education for the teachers, regarding the tools and possibilities for classroom practice.

Based on a Reggio Emilia approach, the first stage in Wooranna Park student learning, is to immerse students in multiple texts (where text can take any format, including world), which stimulate thinking about the concept at hand. The aim for our project was to begin with a generalise conversation about the future, and to then focus in on projects of interest. During this immersion stage, we used many 'taken-for-granted' futures texts, such as Futurama, The Jetsons, Obernewtyn and a variety of songs, and books about the future. We also considered clips from The Flintstones, Dinotopia, Oliver, etc in order to deepen our awareness of the temporality of life, through contrasting past and present.

The teachers, in the ALU, utilised a variety of graphic organisers to collect and represent the students' temporal scans of resources, and their own perspectives. Using a matrix, the students began to focus on their own expectations and imaginings of the future. Not surprisingly, many of these students described techno-futures, including robots, space travel, and the development of more complex technologies. Other students were interested in a 'doom' view of the future, where the environment was in peril, terrorism was becoming more visible, and the likelihood of civil and political wars also increased. Interestingly, a group of students were reflecting upon their personal futures, and they would live in the world with others. They reflected upon what is referred to as vocational futures, and sought out possible future occupations for themselves. The final group were interested in scenario building, or building texts and constructions of the futures.

After the initial excitement, and free flowing of the unit, as it was designed, the teachers were struck by the students' initiatives and self-directedness in exploring the multiplicities of futures. They remarked that the students were not as reticent to participate, as they had expected, and further that they were finding themselves 'redundant' in teaching a unit which couldn't be taught, but rather investigated. The teachers commented that they had not interpreted texts in the same way that the students had, and that students were producing vast amounts of research and knowledge, based on these engagements. On one occasion, when Whitney Houston sang "I believe that children are our future", one child replied "then, why are adults making all the decisions". Similarly, students asked what future she was singing about.

What did the students produce? The students used many futures tools, to investigate and evaluate futures texts, and their validity. The students created their own futures texts. One project generated an e-journal, developing the notion of the extended present with household appliances, and advances in technology, which they were observing. Another group created a Social Futures
website, with film, scripts, future personal profiles, and quotes they had found, whilst researching thoughts about the future. Another group created a version of the television news, as they would expect to see it in thirty years. A group interested in global futures explored how the world has changed, and is currently depicted. This group identified their own preferable global futures, and backcasted, in order to create a rich PowerPoint, detailing the results of their research projects. The scenario-building group created rich multimodal texts, where scenario and supporting texts interacted, and were interdependent in order to consider the possibility and probability of each.

These students presented their work to colleagues at Deakin University, as well as their own peers. The richness of their presentations overwhelmed the lecture theatres, and filled their teachers a strong sense of satisfaction and admiration for these learners. Since this time (2005), the teachers have reported that students engage in texts in a different way, and constantly ask as one of their critical questions, "what view of the future does the author have?", or "how might this look in the future?". The students and teachers have become vigilant in temporal scanning, and developing literacy skills which support engagement with an increasing presence of futures based texts.

Some final thoughts – teachers and foresight literacy

Any act of teaching and learning occurs primarily to achieve ends in the future: personal, professional and social. The whole educational enterprise is intended to contribute towards the further development of the society as a whole (Gidley et al., 2004). These are true futures concerns (Slaughter, 1998). In a compelling address by Peter Garrett (1990), lead singer of Midnight Oil and politician, he stressed the significant role teachers have to play in contributing to a shaping of learner futures. He said:

Thus, teachers face the most formidable of challenges: reconciling hope and history, making sense of the nonsense. Delving into the world of traffic jams and oxygen masks, space stations and tent cities, the teacher might offer us some signposts, or create wondrous lessons that inspire us and teach us about ourselves.

The fast-forward generation is being shaped by audio-visual stimuli, not by literature. 'Fast-forward' means not only moving ahead quickly, but also skipping past things that are too complex, too depressing or too boring ... I propose nothing new, only that teachers should expose the myths of progress and prosperity that are holding up the house of cards. They must bring into focus a vision which does not gloss over the facts behind the nightmare but which manages to engender enthusiasm about the potential of the human spirit despite the bleak circumstances. At the moment the young, especially, have no faith in the future, and so are unwilling to deal with the present except to try and make it as bearable as possible. ... we need teachers to remind us of our
potential to exercise reason, make choices and sacrifices but above all, to participate in the great struggle of hope, renewal and a shared home.

As futurists and futures educators of the early 21st century, we must question what preparation we facilitate and receive in foresight literacy and futures fluencies. Furthermore, we need to challenge educative bodies to nurture a culture of critically futures literate people, shaping prospective futures. This challenge to education is not new, and only small amounts of attention are paid to developing creative futurists, and entrepreneurs. There is a need to look beyond futures as only being the domain of economics, or in regard to space travel and technological advancements. While there seems to be a new interest in futures in education in Australia, unless this interest is married to the vast body of research and knowledge that the futures field has been developing for decades, it will be of little if any transformative value for education of the future.

References


