

# *Lessons for the Future: a geographical contribution*

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*ABSTRACT: This article is based on the author's keynote address at the Geographical Association's 2007 conference on 'Geographical Futures'. Beginning with young people's concerns about the future, attention is drawn to the importance of understanding both spatial and temporal interdependence in geography and, in particular, the need for students and teachers to think more critically and creatively about the future. The field of futures studies is cited as a source of expertise which can be used by geographers to develop a futures dimension in the curriculum. Exemplar futures activities are outlined and seen as vital to any notion of good practice in teaching geography.*

## *Introduction*

'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' (Toffler, 1974).

Given current interest in the nature of a more futures-orientated geography this article sets out ways in which both students and teachers can begin to think more critically and creatively about the future. In particular it explores: i) sources of expertise on futures thinking; ii) why and how these are relevant to geography; iii) what good practice looks like in the classroom.

A recent survey by UCAS and Forum for the Future (2007) invited young university applicants to say what they expected of the future. In particular it asked what they felt life would be like in 25 years' time, when respondents would be in their forties and at the height of their careers. What did these 54,000 'future leaders' expect the world to be like in 2031?

- Respondents expect the world they will be living in to be technologically advanced, but environmentally impoverished
- Three-quarters believe lifestyles will need to change radically for civilisation to survive into the twenty-second century
- Compared to their parents at the same age, 42% see themselves as more worried about the future
- Most (69%) believe that individuals are responsible for the change required for civilisation to continue
- Women are less optimistic about the future than men, feel more change is necessary and are more prepared to contribute to that change (UCAS/FFF, 2007)

I have sometimes heard educators dismiss such views as typical of students and not to be taken seriously. However what we have here is vital information about young people's (future) geographies, a matter which should interest all educators as it provides vital access to the concerns young learners have about local and global society today and in the future. While the views expressed in this survey represent the 'voice' of UK university applicants, they may not be typical of other groups. It is important to recall therefore that views of the future (as of other issues) will vary depending on age, gender, culture and class.

Rex Walford was one of the first geographical educators to call for a futures element in geography when he wrote:

☞ The sustained study of a number of possible geographies of the short-term and middle-term future will encourage the student to consider those aspects of the future which are desirable and those which are not. Hopefully such geography teaching can vitalise school students into an interest in their own futures ...

In urging that we teach a geography of the future, I do not mean to say that we should give up teaching a geography of the past: but we should make that past the servant of the future. If the future is unavoidable let us at least not walk backwards into it' (Walford, 1984, p. 207).

That such an interest is now occurring was witnessed by the theme of the 2007 Geographical Association conference – 'Geographical Futures'.

Geographers come to such an interest in a variety of ways. In my own case it arose from an interest in global issues as a geography teacher in the 1970s, which led to the creation of a national curriculum project on global teaching in the 80s, and an interest in the future impact of global issues in the 90s. My teaching thus began with a

focus on the nature of local-global interdependence (Hicks and Holden, 2007) which then led to an interest in our temporal interdependence and what seemed to be a largely missing dimension in the curriculum (Hicks, 2006).

This growing interest has been visible in geographical education for a number of years at both primary and secondary level. For example, Graham Butt (2002) argues in *Reflective Teaching of Geography 11-18* for a clearer futures component and Margaret Roberts (2003) explores futures in *Learning Through Enquiry*. Simon Catling (2003) calls for a futures perspective in his article 'Curriculum contested: primary geography and social justice' and Alun Morgan (2006) has a chapter on sustainable futures in the *Secondary Geography Handbook*. The pilot GCSE 'Geography 21' notably has 'futures' as one of its five organising concepts ([www.geography.org.uk/projects/pilotgcse](http://www.geography.org.uk/projects/pilotgcse)).

Since notions of the future lie at the heart of what it means to be human it is impossible to conceptualise life in terms solely of past and present. McHale (1978) observes:

“The idea of the future is one of the central symbols through which human beings have ordered their present and given meanings to the past. Whilst futures research in the academic sense is a recent pursuit, conjecture, speculation and exploration of future events have always been prime features of the human condition” (McHale, 1978, p. 5).

It is interesting, therefore, that notions of the future did not emerge in education until the 1970s (Toffler, 1974). However, from the 80s and 90s onwards, there has been a growing international concern that the future should not be a missing dimension in education (Hutchinson, 1996; Hicks and Slaughter, 1998; Page, 2000; Gidley and Inayatullah, 2002), and geography has a significant part to play in rectifying this omission.

In working with teachers over the last decade it has been interesting to see how similar responses have been to Figure 1. All teachers, whether primary or secondary (geographers or not), acknowledge the importance of the spatial dimension and the need for students to understand the local, national and global community. They also readily agree on the need to explore the nature of our spatial interdependence. The temporal dimension, however, always evokes a different response, especially when teachers are asked which elements they feel some responsibility for. Understandably, historians 'claim' the past and all

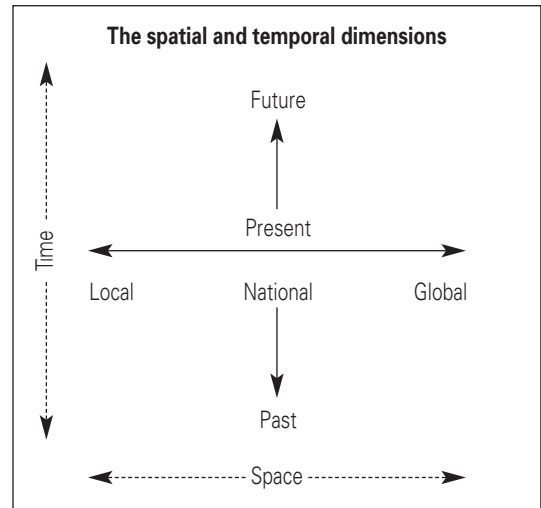


Figure 1: The spatial and temporal dimensions.

teachers see the present as an essential part of their territory. The problem comes with the future. While teachers understand that this must have some implications for their teaching they are much less likely to have any notion of what that might mean. After some discussion it is generally conceded that the future appears to be a missing dimension in education and something that they feel unprepared to deal with.

There are a number of ways in which the future can be missing in the curriculum. Gough (1990), for example, analysed various curriculum documents and identified three main types of reference to the future. *Tacit futures* are all those which are assumed but never made available for scrutiny. The future may not actually be mentioned but assumptions about it are still tacitly present, perhaps when looking at 'environmental change', for example. *Token futures* are those which generally involve clichés and stereotypes; for example, a passing reference to 'education for tomorrow'. *Taken-for-granted futures* occur whenever one particular future is described as if there were no other alternatives. Discussion of the future framed solely in terms of science and technology would fall into this category, or the future seen only from a Western perspective.

An interesting case in point is the QCA Futures Programme ([www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk)). These web pages contain a number of short pieces by eminent educationalists about the future of education and of the curriculum. What is striking is that most of these contributions treat education as if it will occur in some futures vacuum. That is

to say, there is no discussion of the social, cultural, political or environmental context within which education might be taking place. This is always the danger with any study which wants to explore the future of anything, whether of transport, energy or population, for example.

## *Futures studies*

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So what expertise can educators draw on if they wish to be more critically reflective in their approach to the future? It lies in the international academic field of futures studies, which has been in existence for nearly half a century, exemplified by postgraduate work at a number of universities across the world (Dator, 2002). It is a broad field of concern which, Inayatullah (1993, p. 236) notes, 'largely straddles two dominant modes of knowledge – the technical concerned with predicting the future and the humanist concerned with developing a good society.' Bell (1997, p. 73) argues that the purpose of futures studies is to 'discover or invent, examine, evaluate and propose possible, probable and preferable futures.' He continues: 'futurists seek to know: what can or could be (the possible), what is likely to be (the probable), and what ought to be (the preferable).'

Dator (2005) elaborates further:

☞ The future cannot be studied because the future does not exist. Futures studies does not ... pretend to study the future. It studies ideas about the future ... (which) often serve as the basis for actions in the present ... Different groups often have very different images of the future. Men's images may differ from women's. Western images may differ from non-Western, and so on.

One of the main tasks of futures studies is to identify and examine the major alternative futures which exist at any given time and place. The future cannot be predicted, but preferred futures can and should be envisioned, invented, implemented, continuously evaluated, revised, and re-envisioned. Thus, another major task of futures studies is to facilitate individuals and groups in formulating, implementing, and re-envisioning their preferred futures'.

The key texts in this field are Slaughter's (2005) *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, Dator's (2002) *Advancing Futures* and Bell's (1997) two-volume *Foundations of Futures Studies*. These sources illustrate the breadth of concern among futurists as well as some of the main debates within the field (Sardar, 1999). In particular these and other texts exemplify authoritative and innovative practice in

conceptualising and exploring possible, probable and preferable futures at scales from the local to global. They are a vital source of future-orientated tools and techniques which can be used and adapted by educators working in school, Initial Teacher Education and higher education.

## *Futures in education*

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How children come to conceptualise the future is of vital educational interest as this will inevitably affect their adult preconceptions of the future. This, in turn, affects what people feel it is, and is not, worth working for in relation both to their own lives and the future of society.

It is assumed by some educators that younger pupils have little conception of issues in the wider world. However, Fountain (1990) points out that nursery and infant children (4-7) regularly: call each other names (prejudice); arbitrarily exclude others from their play (discrimination); argue over materials (resource distribution); protest that rules are not fair (human rights); waste consumable materials (environmental awareness); find out that more can be accomplished by working together (interdependence). What may be thought of as global issues 'out there' also have their counterparts in children's everyday lives.

Research by early years specialist Page (2000) shows how futures thinking is beginning to develop at age 4-5. While time is viewed purely in terms of the child's own activities, there is a growing sense of progression beginning with notions of 'before' and 'after' and 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow'. There is also a growing awareness of societal issues, e.g. the environment, war, music and places in the news. While thinking about the future at this age often involves imaginative fantasy it is a vital developmental stage. What young children are doing is developing positive feelings about their place in the future and their role in its creation.

By the age of 7-8 children are beginning to demonstrate an 'adult' understanding of time with the emergence of an ability to think ahead and the realisation that the future may be something to work towards as well as something to be concerned about (Hicks and Holden, 1995; Holden, 2007). Reality and fantasy may still sit side by side, children sometimes fearing that their own community may be subject to violence or disasters seen on TV. There is a growing awareness of social and environmental issues and children are

generally optimistic that the future will be better for themselves and others.

Research on how secondary students feel about the future has been carried out in a number of countries, including England (Holden, 2007), Sweden (Oscarsson, 1996) and Australia (Hutchinson, 1996). While the details of young people's concerns vary somewhat over time, a number of common themes tend to occur. Students tend to be relatively optimistic about their own futures but are often more pessimistic about the global scene. Issues to do with injustice, inequality, conflict and environment are frequently mentioned (Gidley and Inayatullah, 2002). Recent research by Eckersley *et al.* (2007, p. 16) argues that:

☞ People's concerns about the future of the world and humanity matter, regardless of whether they are "factually" or "objectively valid". The erosion of faith in society and its future influences the way people see their roles and responsibilities, and their relationship to social institutions, especially government. It denies people a social ideal to believe in and a wider framework of meaning in their lives ...'

It is interesting to note some of the gender differences that emerge from such research. Girls tend to express more interest in personal, local and global futures than boys do. Twice as many secondary girls as boys think that they can make a difference in relation to the future. Most girls prefer an environmentally aware future while boys are more attracted to high-tech futures (Hicks and Holden, 1995; Holden, 2007). Such differences can, of course, be related to what is already known about the gender socialisation of young people.

Before considering what good practice in the classroom might look like it is important to consider the influences that come to bear on young people's views of the future. Hutchinson (1996) observes that many children's toys encourage stereotypical role-models of gender and glorify aggressive handling of conflict – by default the future is therefore both sexist and violent. Similarly comics, especially for adolescents, and computer games often purvey a violent and uncritical high-tech view of the future. School textbooks, Hutchinson observes, generally have little to say about alternative futures and one of their effects is thus to restrict the social imagination.

☞ Whether in relation to our schools, our societies or our futures, when taken-for-granted ways of thinking about the future are left unexamined, a closure of horizons occurs – futures are often foreclosed and "inevitable" are confirmed as realism' (Hutchinson, 1996, p. 208).

What then are the tasks for geography and what might this look like in the primary and secondary classroom?

## *Futures in geography*

It is probably most useful to talk about the need for a *futures dimension* in the curriculum and for young people to develop a *futures perspective* on their lives and on the world.

The purpose of such a dimension is to help teachers and students:

- develop a more future-orientated perspective on their own lives and events in the wider world
- exercise critical thinking skills and the creative imagination more effectively
- identify and envision alternative futures which are more just and sustainable
- engage in active and responsible citizenship in the local, national and global community, on behalf of both present and future generations

What this might look like in practice is illustrated by the following practical classroom activities, each of which encourages students to think more critically and creatively about the future.

### **Trends shaping the future**

Each year the Worldwatch Institute publishes *Vital Signs: The trends that are shaping our future*. This is an excellent resource for geography teachers, helpfully laid out in double-page spreads, each of which contains graphs, statistics and essential information on a key global trend. Such trends, whether they are increasing, declining or stable, can give advanced warning of future possibilities. Some of the global trends examined in the 2006 issue of *Vital Signs* (Worldwatch Institute, 2006) include:

- Global economy continues to grow
- World fish harvest stable but threatened
- Climate change impacts rise
- Use of wind and solar energy increasing
- Vehicle production continues to expand
- HIV/AIDS threatens development
- Number of violent conflicts drops
- Obesity reaches epidemic levels
- Corporate responsibility taking root

Different trends can be related to different aspects of the geography curriculum and questions such as the following explored: What are some of the main ‘drivers of change’ here? What are the implications for the future? Who will benefit from this trend and who will not? What effect might this have on the local community? What might be done to diminish/strengthen the impact of this trend?

### The 200-year present

What are the different ways in which one might conceptualise the ‘present’? One notion is that we might think in terms of a 200-year present since in many communities there will be centenarians who were born a hundred years ago. In talking with and listening to such members of the community we are linked, through their life experiences, with the events of the last hundred years. Similarly there will be babies born today who will live for a hundred years. Maybe this is the period for which we should feel some sense of temporal responsibility since we are rooted within it. One way of visualising this is shown in Figure 2.

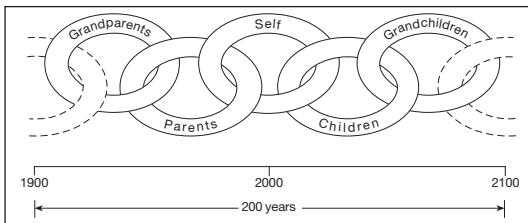


Figure 2: The extended present – a family chain.

Using this diagram one teacher asked her class whether they could think of anything in the family that had been passed on through the generations. At first there was no response, then one girl hesitantly replied: ‘My mum gave me her ring which I think she got from my grandma ... if one day, when I grow up, I had a daughter ... I might give her that ring and ... if she had a daughter then one day she might give it to her’. This was followed by a boy who said: ‘My mum says I have my grandad’s ears ...’ The class then began to explore other things that were passed on between the generations.

This eventually led to an exploration of how the local community had changed over the last hundred years and how it might change in the students’ lifetime. A concept such as the 200-year present can thus be used to enhance reflection on questions such as: How is this place changing?

How do people feel about this? How do you feel about this? How may this place change in the future?

### Possible, probable and preferable futures

At any one point in time any number of alternative futures can potentially occur. One particularly useful way of exploring this is the classification often used by futurists which distinguishes between possible, probable and preferable futures. Possible futures are all those which could conceivably exist at some time. All possible futures lie somewhere between the best (utopian) and the worst (dystopian) that can be imagined. Probable futures are all those that seem most *likely* to come about, for example in our own lives or as a result of forecasting. Research suggests that students often seem pessimistic about the probable future, especially at the global level, although less so at a personal level (Holden, 2007). Preferable futures are all those futures that one most *desires* to come about because of one’s most deeply held values and beliefs. They are the visions of a better world that are needed in order to clarify action for positive change in the present.

While it is useful to explore possible futures the most useful pairing in the classroom is that between probable and preferable futures. Probable futures are all those that seem most likely to come about – they are the provenance of people such as town planners, scenario builders and civil servants. How many school places will be needed in the future? How many hospital beds? How many motorways will need widening? Everyone is interested in probable futures because they seem most likely, whether in relation to economic trends, town expansion or climate change. If young people are concerned about the future (UCAS/Forum For the Future, 2007) it is because of what they presume will happen, i.e. what they feel is most likely. This does not necessarily mean they are right in their assumptions but there should always be space for their voice to be heard – and not lightly dismissed.

Nor should preferable futures be dismissed since they are neither ‘unrealistic fantasy’ nor a ‘waste of time’. Human beings have always had notions of what a better future might look like and have striven, if not to achieve that for themselves, then for their descendants. All of us today benefit (although unequally) from the visions of a better future that our parents and ancestors had, whether in relation to the vote, health care, civic rights or conditions at work. What would we therefore wish for our children and

grandchildren? Preferable futures act as a 'guiding star' giving one something to aim for.

### Mapping the future

Timelines are a useful way of exploring probable and preferable futures. They can be used in a variety of ways and at a variety of time scales, ranging from a few months to a decade or more. One starts with a location, issue or trend that is under investigation, whether the future of the Somerset levels, traffic management in the local urban area, or energy options for the future of the UK. First, on the left-hand side of the figure, students in pairs briefly indicate key elements of the present situation. This could be using words, diagrams or cartoons. Next, the probable timeline is filled in. The teacher should decide the appropriate horizon and the key question is: 'What changes are most likely to happen here?' Words, dates, cartoons can be used to illustrate what seems to be a likely sequence of events.

Not until this has been completed should the preferable timeline be completed, for which the question is: 'What would you personally prefer to see happen here?' The timeline should be completed in the same way as before. A set of timelines on the wall focusing on a particular issue can provide a dramatic display and has a powerful energy of its own because it is about what could/should be.

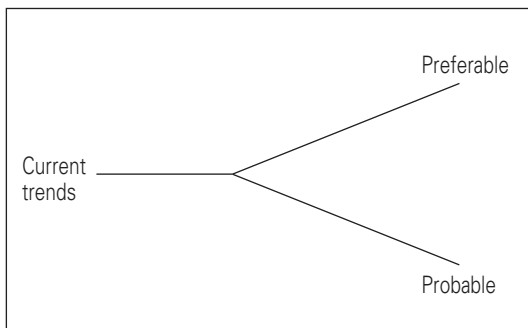


Figure 3: Using timelines.

A number of interesting questions arise: How similar/different are students' probable futures? Are there any common themes? How similar/different are their preferable futures? Are there common themes? If there is a significant difference between probable and preferable futures other important questions arise: Who else shares such a vision of the future? Which people and organisations are working to create such a

future? It is this latter part of the exercise that empowers young people because they learn that, whatever the issue, there are others with similar concerns who are working positively for change.

Two important caveats occur at this point. First, people do not necessarily agree on the nature of either probable or preferable futures. There will be differences depending on age, gender, class and culture, which provide a fruitful field for values enquiry and clarification. Second, there is often a tendency among young people to feel either that change is not their responsibility or that they personally can make little difference. To do nothing, however, is to assent to the status quo, and the question 'What part can I play here?' lies at the heart of citizenship. It is true, as Heater (1999) points out, that there are two distinctive traditions within citizenship; i) the civic tradition, with its origins in ancient Greece and Rome, focusing on the responsibility the citizen has to the community, and ii) the liberal tradition, which arose in the eighteenth century, focusing on the protection of individual rights. It is the civic tradition which is appropriately highlighted in the national curriculum today.

### Using scenarios

Scenarios are 'pictures' of the future, particularly employed by business and the military, for example, to identify possible hazards, options and choices that may lie ahead. In considering any situation a number of contrasting scenarios are always considered. Scenarios are not predictions or forecasts but suggestions about how the world *might* turn out (possible futures). Hammond writes:

Like any good story, scenarios have a set of circumstances or constraints within which they occur ... the point of the story is not to develop a more accurate view of the future; it is to enable the reader to look at the present in a new light – to see it more clearly, to see new possibilities and implications – and hence to make better decisions. Scenarios are powerful because they help those who read them to visualize in more concrete and human terms – to emotionally connect with – what might otherwise be only an abstract trend, a line on a graph. They make far more vivid the potential consequences of current trends or proposed actions' (Hammond, 1999, p. 14-15).

Scenarios can also be used for wider social purposes and, in his discussion of regional scenarios, Hammond takes three quite different ones: i) Market World: a new age of golden prosperity? ii) Fortress World: instability and violence? iii) Transformed World: changing the human endeavour? He comments: 'To be useful

... a scenario must jar us out of familiar assumptions and challenge us to think about how the world might be different. It must therefore be powerfully, even provocatively, stated' (Hammond, 1999, p. 16). A good example of the geographical use of scenarios is that by Morgan (2006), which sets out scenarios for

the future of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. The two scenarios shown here come from a set of four used in *Citizenship for the Future* entitled: Business as Usual, Technological Fix, Edge of Disaster, and Sustainable Development (Hicks, 2001).

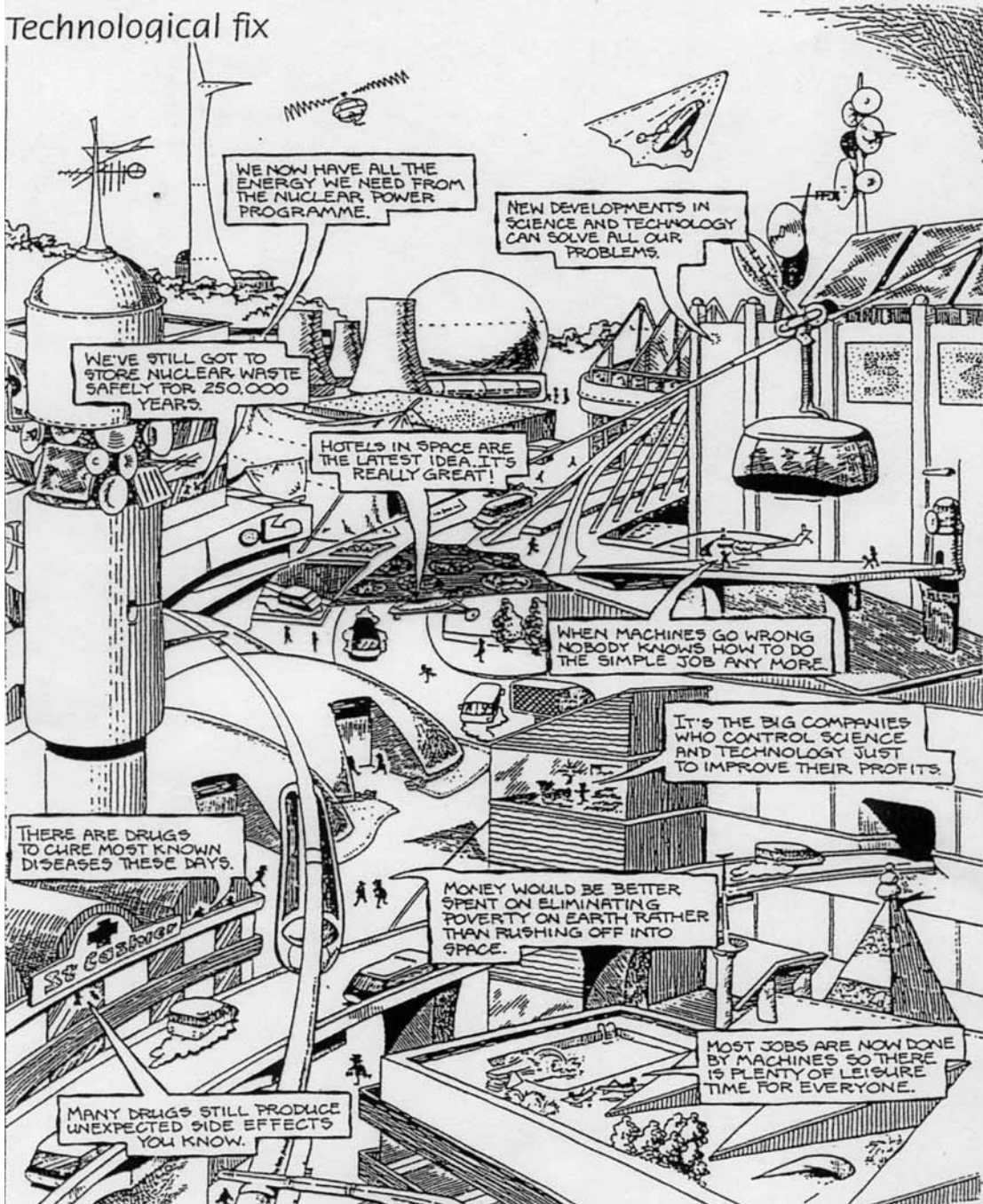


Figure 4: Technological fix.

In each scenario people are discussing how they feel about living in this future present with comments expressing a mix of positive and negative attitudes. In the exercise that goes with these scenarios there are five questions to be applied to each:

1. Do you think people like living in this possible future?
2. What are some of the good things about it?

3. What are some of the difficult things about it?
4. Who will benefit and who will lose in this future?
5. Say why you would or wouldn't like to live in this future.

Other activities relate to energy options, transport choices and global warming. All can be used at KS2 and 3 especially in relation to issues of citizenship and sustainability.

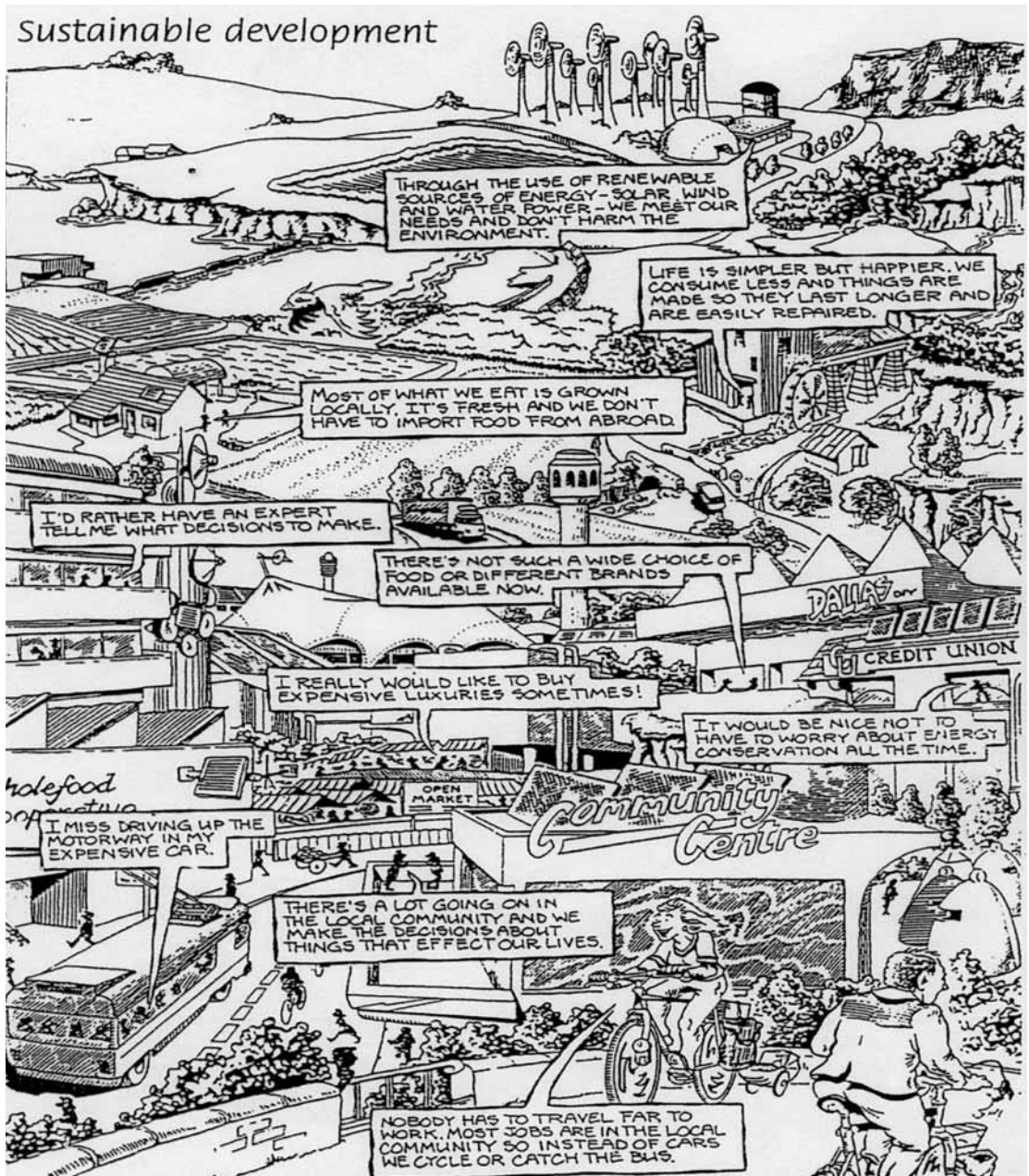


Figure 5: Sustainable development.

## Envisioning the future

If one cannot envision a sustainable community to prompt debate then this clearly diminishes the chance of such communities ever being brought about. Futurists stress that the creative imagination can be used in a variety of ways to enable the individual and groups to identify their future priorities more clearly. One example of this process can be found in Hicks (2002). It is also important to note, as Meadows *et al.* (2005, p. 272) stress:

☞ We should say immediately, for the sake of sceptics ... we do not believe vision makes anything happen. Vision without action is useless. But action without vision is directionless and feeble. Vision is absolutely necessary to guide and motivate. More than that, vision, when widely shared and firmly kept in sight, does bring into being new systems.'

## *Geography for a better world*

Some 20 years ago Fien and Gerber (1988) produced a classic text entitled *Teaching Geography for a Better World*, a handbook for teaching about 'issues of current and future global concern'. This tradition is a long-standing one in geography (Walford, 2001; Wood, 2005) which recognises the need for the subject to reflect matters of contemporary concern (Balderstone, 2006).

Opposition to such future-orientated geography teaching is short sighted and, rather than imagining that such differences can be resolved by rational debate, is better seen as an irresolvable clash of educational ideologies (Apple, 2006). Thus, while it is important to understand contrary views they often reflect minority opposition to, and denial of, pressing issues, as Monbiot (2006) demonstrates in his analysis of organisations set up to discredit scientific research on climate change. This is why the skills of values clarification, moral reasoning and action learning (McPartland, 2006) need to be at the heart of the geographical endeavour.

In conclusion, here are some questions to consider about futures in geography.

- What are the local-global issues that we and young people need to understand here in the early twenty-first century?
- How are we connected personally and in our communities to such wider global issues?

- Is it possible that our teaching on global issues may actually lead to disillusionment and despair?
- What responsibility do we and young people have to engage in considered action for change?
- What is it that future generations might ask of us here in the present if they could speak to us?
- Would you agree with Freire (1994) that 'One of the tasks of the progressive educator ... is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles might be'?

What is exciting about geography today is that it is the first curriculum subject in the UK to take seriously the need for such critical and creative thinking about the future.

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## Figures

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