

5. TEACHING ABOUT THE FUTURE

➤ LECTURE NOTES

Cross-curricular concerns

- An interdisciplinary approach
- Two long-standing traditions in education

Thinking about the future

- Common ways of referring to the future in education
- The educational rationale for a futures perspective

Some classroom applications

- The skills involved in futures thinking
- The importance and use of scenarios

➤ KEY READING

- Hicks, D. (2008) A futures perspective: lessons from the schoolroom ([Downloads](#))
- Hicks, D. (2006) *Lessons for the Future* ([Publications](#))

➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the commonest ways of referring to the future in educational resources that you use?
- In what context can you imagine using a set of scenarios and what would be the focus of each?

➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Critical understanding of what is meant by a futures perspective
- Critical understanding of how to implement this in the curriculum

LECTURE NOTES

1. CROSS-CURRICULAR CONCERNS

An interdisciplinary approach

What educators and politicians believe should be in the school curriculum varies between different countries (geographically) and also over time (historically). There is also an ideological tension between knowledge formulated as discrete subjects (preferred by traditionalists) and knowledge which requires an interdisciplinary approach (preferred by progressives). Whilst the UK curriculum is largely defined in subject terms there is also recognition that some vital concerns are cross-curricular in nature. Examples from the UK curriculum would be 'Identity and cultural diversity', the 'Global dimension and sustainable development' and 'Creativity and critical thinking' (QCA, 2009). Although the Conservative coalition appears to have dropped the notion of cross-curriculum concerns (see Session 4: Ideology and Education) it is to be hoped that those with an interest in developing a futures perspective can root this in both subject areas and the wider school ethos. Whilst it could be argued that the future should be a curriculum dimension in its own right this is not something that has ever formally been recognised in the UK.

Two long-standing traditions

It is clear from what has been said so far in this unit that futures education (as well as a range of other educational endeavours) requires exploration of social, environmental, economic and political issues. Such an approach to education is part of a long-standing tradition in educational theory and practice. Robin Richardson (1990:6-7) writes of the need for two vital traditions to come together – the personal and the political.

[We need] a synthesis between two main traditions of educational thinking...The one tradition is concerned with learner-centred education, and the development and fulfilment of individuals. This tradition is humanistic and optimistic, and has a basic trust in the capacity and will of human beings to create healthy and empowering systems and structures. In recent years it has been much influenced and strengthened by the new paradigms of wholeness being developed in both the physical and organic sciences, including in particular physics, biology, medicine and psychology.

The second tradition is concerned with building equality, and with resisting the trend for education merely to reflect and replicate inequalities in wider society of race, gender and class; it is broadly pessimistic in its assumption that inequalities are

the norm wherever and whenever they are not consciously and strenuously resisted. 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 a partial success 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.

Education should therefore be about changing both self and society, they are two sides of the same coin. This is recognised by most progressive ventures in education, whether futures education, global education, education for sustainability or citizenship education.

2. THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

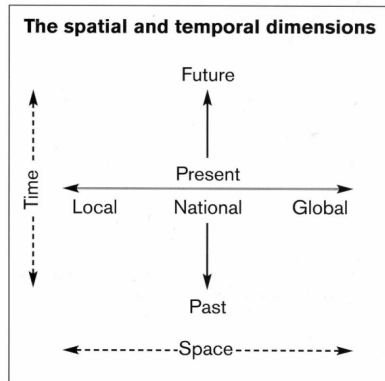
Common ways of referring to the future

Noel Gough (1990) carried out an investigation into the ways in which the future is referred to in educational documents and identified three common types of reference which he called - tacit, token and taken for granted.

- *Tacit futures* are all those which are assumed but remain hidden. Thus whilst the future may not be mentioned in a document assumptions about it are still tacitly present, e.g. that education is in some general sense about preparing children for their adult life.
- *Token futures* involve clichés and stereotypes presented in a rhetorical fashion. Gough notes, 'When one finds 'the future'...in the title of an educational document it usually means much less than might be expected'. The future is referred to in passing, maybe in the title, but then not subsequently explored.
- *Taken-for-granted futures* occur whenever a particular future, or range of futures, is described as if there were no other alternatives. Discussion of the future framed solely in terms of science and technology, learning via the internet or only involving a western worldview would be in this category.

How true do you think this is of educational literature on policy and curriculum in your subject area or your educational system? The crucial question that arises from Gough's work is 'How and where in the curriculum do we encourage young people (and teachers) to think more critically and creatively about the future?'

A futures perspective



One way of looking at the curriculum is to consider that it has both a spatial and temporal dimension. The global dimension highlights the need for young people to learn about their local area, their country and the wider world and, most importantly, to understand the nature of the interrelationships between local, national and global.

Equally young people need to learn about the past, present and future, how they are interrelated and how they influence each other. In so doing they can develop a futures perspective. However, whilst teachers are clear that they have a responsibility to teach about the past (history) and the present they are often unclear about the need for and nature of a futures perspective.

Internationally educators use the term 'futures education' as shorthand for this latter concern. Put at its simplest this describes a form of education which *promotes the knowledge, skills and understanding that are needed in order to think more critically and creatively about the future*. Elaborated in more detail it: i) enables pupils to understand *the links* between their own lives in the present and those of others in the past and future; ii) increases understanding of the *social, political and cultural influences* which shape people's perceptions of personal, local and global futures; iii) develops the *skills, attitudes and values* which encourage foresight and enable pupils to identify probable and preferable futures; iv) works towards achieving a *more just and sustainable future* in which the welfare of both people and planet are of equal importance.

Unless this temporal element is clearly present in the curriculum personal, local and global futures will generally remain tacit, token and taken-for-granted. Thus whilst in relation to many issues one may well help students explore 'Where are we now?' and 'How did we get here?' the crucially empowering questions of 'Where do we want to get to?' and 'How do we get there?' still often remain unexamined.

The educational rationale

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

A better world

It is important in a democratic society that pupils 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.

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

3. SOME CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Futures thinking

How might one summarise the skills that a more futures-orientated curriculum should develop? Put succinctly I believe it looks like this.

1. *Anticipating the future*

- understanding the uses of hindsight
- understanding the need for foresight
- in a rapidly changing world

2. *Accepting consequences*

- for oneself, others and the environment
- in the present/in this place
- elsewhere in time and space
-

3. *Envisioning alternatives*

- considering a range of scenarios
- personal, local and global
- identifying preferable futures

4. *Making wiser choices*

- choosing from alternatives
- weighing up benefits/disbenefits
- to make present best choices

5. *Taking responsible action*

- in one's personal life
- in the local community
- as a global citizen

One begins with issues in the present and looks ahead to their possible consequences and responsibility for these. This then leads to consideration of a range of possible future outcomes and the identifying of both probable and preferable futures. As a result wiser and more responsible choices can be made about future directions and implemented in the present.

Using scenarios

Scenarios are a useful tool for exploring possible futures and generally involve three to five quite distinct and different versions of the future. Each scenario is designed to highlight a different option or outcome of present choices. Alternative scenarios (both written and illustrated) could thus be drawn up for a new shopping centre, a revised transport system or the local area as a whole. Such scenarios could be provided by the teacher in advance or drawn up by students themselves. Subsequently students then need to find out who else is doing this sort of work in the community. What would they need to do to make their own voice heard in such a context? Here are some examples.

- Students draw up alternative scenarios for a contrasting locality in geography, e.g. to show the different possible impacts of tourism on the Lake District or of flood defences on the Somerset levels.
- Scenarios could be drawn up to explore different energy options for the future in relation to improved energy efficiency, use of renewable energy, fossil fuels and climate change.
- Climate change scenarios could be investigated for different regions of the country and the possible/probable futures (see session 6) ascertained. What needs to be done locally, regionally and nationally to prepare for such changes?
- Useful examples of scenarios for use in the classroom can be found in *Citizenship for the Future* (Hicks, 2001. [Publications](#)) and *Lessons for the Future* (Hicks, 2006) using the following headings: More of the Same, Technological Fix, Edge of Disaster and Sustainable Development. The accompanying questions for each are: Do you think people like living in this possible future? What are some of the good things about it? What are some of the difficult things about it? Who will benefit and who will lose in this future? Say why you would or wouldn't want to live in this future?

Whilst this session has particularly drawn on the UK experience of futures education there are also other important international initiatives. For example, Gidley and Hampson (2005) describe the evolution of futures in schools, Hicks and Slaughter (1998) offer a wide range of case studies, Gidley and Inayatullah (2002) explore the nature of youth futures, Slaughter and Bussey (2006) provide practical classroom activities and Hicks (2011) explores the nature of more sustainable futures.

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- QCA (2009) *Cross- Curriculum Dimensions: A planning guide for schools*, London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
- Richardson, R. (1990) *Daring to be a Teacher*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books
- Slaughter, R. & Bussey, M. (2006) *Futures Thinking for Social Foresight*, Taipei: Tamkang University

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether you are reading this for your own interest, sharing this material with others or using it as an aid to your teaching this session raises questions about the purposes and uses of futures education. After checking 'Discussion skills in group' jot down your response to the following questions:

1. What are the commonest ways of referring to futures in educational sources that you know?
2. In what context can you imagine using a set of scenarios and what would be the focus of each?

After discussing each question (it is useful to agree in advance how long to spend on each) list on a flipchart the main responses arising in the group. What similarities are there, what differences? What might be the possible origins of these? What further reading might be useful?