

Futures in Education: Substance Not Rhetoric

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The glaring contradiction that lies at the heart of contemporary education systems was again clearly illustrated by Geoff Spring in his article in *The Age* of Monday 4th of August: Future demands a fresh look at teacher training.

The piece opened and closed with familiar rhetoric about ‘the future.’ The rest dealt with arrangements for reviewing teacher training and for financing and administering the educational system in Victoria. The underlying problem is that Spring is writing out of a taken-for-granted framework founded in current politics and economics which simply cannot, as it currently stands, embrace a wider, longer-term view. But it could do so.

The contradiction is this: we pour billions of dollars every year into a system which is supposed to prepare the young for active citizenship in the early 21st century. But the paradigm limitations of politics, economics and associated administrative structures obscure the very means to develop and implement an intelligent forward view. It is curious that, as corporations and public utilities already know, the near-term future is not a mystery. Without falling into naive predictions, we have access to a collective body of knowledge about the essential features of the near-term future. However, education systems run on the administrative imperatives of the past: economy, efficiency, effectiveness and control. In this context ‘the future’ becomes an abstract category of no present interest. Hence current administrators at the very highest levels are unaware of the options that are actually available to re-orient the system toward the future in substantial, rather than merely rhetorical, ways.

Present educational systems are quintessentially ‘industrial era’ organisations: rigid and inflexible hierarchies with ‘top-down’ power structures. The minister is at the top, the teachers and students are at the bottom. The latter are marginalised and disempowered. They know it. Such systems are guided less by a clear view of human and social needs than by a pervasive corporatist ideology such as was described in John Saul’s illuminating book *The Unconscious Civilisation*.¹ Hence education systems are inward-looking, lacking in vision and incapable of responding to the emerging picture of the near-term future.

We need a number of conceptual and practical innovations. For example, we need to have clear picture of the ‘civilisational challenge’ ahead. This requires a synthesis from many sources that accurately portrays the way that *homo sapiens* has overwhelmed many of the planet’s life-support systems and is therefore now charged to learn the arts of planet management, and to learn them fast. Second, we need to implement in all organisations, large and small, the means to develop and sustain the forward view. Third, we need the active support of the tertiary institutions in these tasks. I was delighted to see a frank admission of this by Professor Don Aitkin of Canberra University in his comments on a recent submission to the West enquiry into higher education.²

In summary, what I am suggesting is that Geoff Spring’s frame of reference is too limited, too conventional, too tied to past maps and priorities. In a word it is badly out of date. Hence, so is the structure that he heads. In this world, the minister would logically be the last to know where the real sources of innovation might lie. So what can be done?

At the system level an environmental scanning capability dedicated solely to educational needs should be created. Job descriptions should be revised so as to staff the appropriate ‘niches’ within which the forward view can be created and maintained. The insights so gained should then be

networked throughout the whole system. Finally, futures studies should be seen as a powerful new synthesising discipline that is integral to any and all educational tasks. This is where the universities and bureaucracies have been most remiss. They have not yet moved to integrate futures thinking into their procedures or their programs. They have missed the fact that ‘teacher quality’ is an unattainable myth unless it is grounded in a viable forward view.

At the school level, the forward view should be implemented on a whole-school basis. Schools, and those managing them, need access to strategic futures tools and methods in order to look beyond the ‘bottom line’ of the annual report and the latest ministerial directive. The Futurescan process is a simple one that can be learned and applied in every school at low cost. But at present it remains unavailable because there is simply no official interest in, or support for, such forward-looking strategic competencies. It’s no wonder principals feel short-changed by the mis-named ‘schools of the future’ and the rhetoric that emerges from it - they *have* been short-changed. There is no future in current arrangements: ‘schools of the future;’ ‘schools of the third millennium’ are political window-dressing, pure and simple.

A school system that fails to gear up for the future as a substantive focus of intention and capacity will become ever more redundant as the tides of universal communication systems drown them in a sea of more compelling options.

Equally, schools can survive and thrive far into the 21st century. They are, or could be, vital contexts for socialisation and social integration. Without them society may very well fragment into unrelated splinters and ever more esoteric sub-cultures. That future is not one we should contemplate with equanimity. But its roots are clearly visible.

Rather, we should require existing political and administrative leaders to lift their heads from the sand, from the past, and craft a forward-looking education system that actually delivers what their present rhetoric falsely claims. The means are plentifully available. Only the political will is lacking.

The Age, Opinion Page, Melbourne, August 1997

¹ Saul, J. *The Unconscious Civilisation*, New York, Free Press, 1997.

² Aitkin, D. University Challenge, *The Australian*, 19th March, 1997, pp 32-3. In this article Aitkin broke through the usual ‘barrier of silence’ that still applies within education systems at the very highest levels. In part, he wrote that:

It seems to me that humanity may have only two generations left in which to sort out how to modify the impact of the human species on the planet. If it does not learn how to do that, then the world is likely to experience a catastrophe even more severe than that of the Roman Empire. Compared with 1500 years ago, we do know in some detail what is happening and we know at least some of what needs to be done. Moreover, we understand that where we do not know something, we can set about finding it out... (He added that) the principle institution in humanity’s race to save itself, if we set aside enlightened governments, is the modern university...