

WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN?

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This article is an expanded version of a speech given at a 2003 IDEAS session of the Powerhouse festival. The panellists of the session 'When Will We Ever Learn' were asked to comment on the questions of 'What sort of education do we need for the future?' and 'Who is deciding what we should learn, and what do they know?'. In my address and this article I argue that we urgently need to introduce peace education in schools and balance the predominant focus on vocational education with learning of skills which enrich in different ways and help create a fair and just society. Here is why.

Who is deciding what we should learn?

In 1949 George Orwell wrote the well-known and not quite inspiring sentence: 'Those who control the past, control the future; those who control the future, control the present, those who control the present, control the past.' Rather than engaging with conspiracy and quasi-conspiracy theories in trying to determine who controls the past, present and the future, I here argue that most of our present societies are currently dominated by a particular set of discourses and world views. That is, most of our societies are still prisoners of a world view that is in line with the previous goals of the industrial society—dominated by materialism and technocentrism. These goals assume the accumulation of material goals as the measure of a successful and fulfilling human life. They also assume that progress means technological innovation and development. Thus there is the dominance of vocational and technically measurable aspects of education, the key words being efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. As argued by Allan Luke (2002):

Australian state governments' theoretically eclectic and avowedly practical approaches to curriculum making are a neo-Tylerism, focused on the production of quantifiable, tractable and 'useful' outcomes.

Educators are often told that to teach means engaging with the future, that they hold 'the future' in their hands, and that their role is to prepare students for the future (Slaughter, 1996, p. 152). But the nature of the future that students are meant to prepare for is rarely critically analysed. The underlying assumption is that 'the future' means a post-industrial, globalised, pan-capitalist world and a post-information, networked society.

The dominant narrative urges us to be convinced about the inevitability of globalised cyber futures. However, alternatives to the dominant, eg. the future sustainable/ecological, multicultural/cosmopolitan or

partnership society is apparently 'optional' and utopian rather than 'the realistic' future. The dominant story about the future, therefore, eliminates alternatives not by making them illegal, immoral or unpopular, but by making them invisible and therefore irrelevant (Postman, 1993, p. 48).

The world view that controls the future, and those that champion it, focuses on the technological because focusing on social or environmental realities would mean questioning the very conditions that help make their dominant position assured. It is thus almost universally accepted that each student should learn operational skills, that a computer should be put in every classroom and/or on every child's desk, so that every classroom was wired to be in tune with the future.

Nothing is wrong with learning operational skills, and networking classrooms. What is problematic is to define the future only in terms of technological drivers wherein consequently the solution to all our current problems is, of course, through more and more technology. That is, pollution created by old technology will be resolved by new technology. There is no need to change our habits of overconsumption and pollution, as new technologies will fix the ozone hole, find ways to dispose of rubbish and toxins more efficiently, stop violence through enhanced security, and so on. These days, most schools in Australia do focus more and more on ecological preservation. Children are both made aware of environmental problems as well as the practical skills how to resolve them. However, overall, this ecological approach is an add-on to the dominant educational paradigm, one that asserts that the so called 'information society' is the only possible future.

In addition to seeing the technological as *the* solution it is also problematic to see new technologies as 'only tools,' that is, in objective and neutral terms. Instead, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) should be seen as a product of a particular world view, culture and in line with a particular desired vision of and for the future.

For example, Ziauddin Sardar (2000, p. 734) writes that cyberspace is 'an emphatic product of the culture, world-view and technology of Western civilisation.' It did not appear from nowhere. Rather, 'it is a conscious reflection of the deepest desires, aspirations, experiential yearning and spiritual Angst of Western man' (Sardar, p. 734). Cyberspace is the "American dream" writ large; it marks the dawn of a new "American civilisation" It is a place where white man's burden shifted from its 'moral

obligation to civilise, democratise, urbanise and colonise non-Western cultures, to the colonisation of cyberspace' (Sardar, p. 735). In Cyberspace, continues Sardar, diversity of real life is occluded by on-line monoculture. With its technoutopian ideology cyberspace is 'an instrument for distracting Western society from its increasing spiritual poverty, utter meaningless and grinding misery and inhumanity of everyday lives' (p. 751).

Such a harsh critique of the Internet may be far fetched but still it is important to remember that no new technology is culturally, socially or gender neutral. In addition, it is also important to recognise that even new technologies always have 'side effects.' New ICTs have so far focused mostly on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence while neglecting the bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial, existential, musical, naturalist, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences (Gardner, 2000). For example, when we communicate via email, we only deal with about 15% information that we would receive if we were communicating in person (ie. body language, facial expressions, the voice, 'energy' of the person and other visual and acoustic information). Education for the future, I maintain, should be much more than predominantly about increased access to information, about the development of intellect and about techno operational skills and expertise.

Another dominant vision of the future—or competitive globalised world—is even more problematic. We (global human society) look at the future through the cultural lenses of a power-based world, the same way we look at our past in terms of the survival of the fittest, competition, control, domination, violence and power struggle. We remember people who kill rather than give birth, and the more people they kill the more entrenched they are in our memory—Cesar, Ghengis Khan, Alexander the Great, Attila the Hun, William the Conqueror, Hitler, Napoleon, to name but a few. It is they who are seen as the shakers and the makers of our history, present and future. This is because:

Messiahs, diplomats, intellectuals, and philosophers have certainly contributed to the twist and turns of history, but they have flourished only when protected by military leaders who could ensure the survival of their way of life. The most influential leaders in world history have come not from the church, the halls of governments, or the scholastic centres but from the ranks of soldiers and sailors (CarpeNoctem, 2000).

In other words, domination and exploration (for

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the purpose of colonisation) are—and remain—the two main guiding principles that underpin the dominant world view. So too, the future that is currently propagated is defined in these terms; the given future is that of a competitive, (economically) globalised world. The vision of an economically globalised world—the way it is expressed within global media and official political discourse—is also based on the social

Darwinian paradigm (wherein evolution is defined in terms of the survival of the fittest), on belief in the western world being at the top of the development ladder, and on the myth of the free market. Education is thus to produce a skilled, flexible and movable global worker who has the skills to achieve and compete. Consequently education is increasingly seen in terms of 'human capital' formation, as predominantly an investment in the economy. Education for the future is to enhance the industrial/materialistic world view wherein 'cutthroat competition is the norm (where) you compete against others to make a killing' (Elgin & LeDrew, 1997). Even community building is referred to as social capital formation.

Why is this a problem?

In our interconnected world of the present—and even more of the future—we need to move into integrated and holistic thinking. For example, when schools advertise that they can help students achieve, get ahead and successfully compete in the future, they should also engage with the questions of who are the people their students are going to be competing against, and what happens to these others if they win? Who are we competing against at the international level? What are the consequences of our victories? And is it possible at all to transform this type of 'win-lose' thinking into cooperative approaches, nationally and internationally?

Writing in the context of the two European World Wars, Lewis Mumford (quoted in Hutchinson, 1996) stated that too often education provides a theoretical basis/pedagogical preparation for the practical use of homicide and genocide (eg. our nation is the best, we are always right, they are wrong, evil, etc.). We could add to this list the potential for omnicide—destruction of all living beings—as already species are disappearing yearly in the hundreds. The push towards competitive globalised world education does not resolve the danger of omnicide, rather, it exacerbates the problem.

Education that focuses only on the vocational and

the technological forgets that presently the main threat to our future comes from how we currently handle our human relationships. Yes, in the future we will also need to look for meaningful work and get jobs/income. But seeing employment as the main prerequisite of a successful and healthy society of the future is no longer valid. Culturally, ecologically and socially, our global human society is in disarray. Discrimination, intolerance, pollution, conflicts and warfare continue.

For example, we currently spend almost a trillion dollars a year globally on weapons and related military expenditures. Not only that, we (global human society) have not learned what Gandhi taught us that an 'eye for an eye leaves everybody blind;' we keep on spending more and more on weapons, increasing expenditures every year. Thus global military expenditures increased to 784 billion US \$ in 2002 from 741 billion US \$ in 2001 (Deen, 2003). These 40 billions could and should have been spent differently. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (1994, pp. 50-51) has estimated that redirecting just one quarter of developing countries' military expenditures could have provided the additional resources to implement most of the year 2000 programme: primary health care for all, immunisation of all children, elimination of severe malnutrition, provision of safe drinking water for all, universal primary education, reduction of illiteracy, and family planning. The year 2000 goals for children, which call for an assault on poverty and underdevelopment through advancement in these areas, could be achieved for US \$30 billion a year more than is currently spent.

Lots of people are still convinced that we need those weapons to protect ourselves, to increase our own security. I find this type of thinking dangerous. Weapons are always allegedly obtained for protection, and yet, somebody has to attack for violence to actually take place. Currently, there are over 80 low-grade conflicts being fought around the globe. Obviously, these would not be possible unless the attack/the aggression took place.

In my own life, I saw that every time someone was protecting me many people died. First, the president of Serbia where I lived at the time, Slobodan Milosevic, decided to defend 'us' from 'the evil' Croats and Bosnian Muslims. As a consequence, over 200,000 people died, around 50,000 women were purposely raped because they belonged to 'the enemy' and around two

million people were displaced. Next he decided it was time he defended us from the Kosovo Albanians. People were dying again. Then NATO decided to defend Kosovo Albanians and us—his own people—from Milosevic. More deaths, destruction and environmental damage followed.

But surely Australians should not be worried about such occurrences as this is above all a peaceful and 'lucky country.' Contrary to this view, I would assert that, if a holistic view is taken into account, this belief is false. During the last two years, Australia has fought two wars (Afghanistan, Iraq) and continues to do so ('war against terrorism'). As an overdeveloped nation, it continues to contribute to environmental degradation and the colonisation of 'other' lands and

peoples. The myth of a lucky country is still largely reserved for non-indigenous Australians. Genuine refugees (including children) who cross the border illegally are kept in camps for years on end. Bullying in our schools and at work continues. One recent study by Healthworks, for example, found that over 85 per cent of Australians reported they had witnessed bullying at their work (Robinson, 2003).

Educational institutions continue to overtly and subtly support the nation-building efforts through wars as well as through the righteousness of 'our' battles (eg. ANZAC, candle vigils for 'our' victims/heroes). Schools too often remain oblivious to establishment of 'a pecking order' away from the classroom (eg., on the playground, at sporting events that schools endorse, etc.). Arguably, none of the above is an indicator of a peaceful and peace oriented/dedicated society and educational system.

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**What sort of education do we need
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Given the previous examination, the sort of education we need for the future should, above all, be about peace—about teaching and learning how to daily and continuously enact peace at individual, community, social, global and planetary level. This is because the threats to our common future come predominantly from the lack of quality relationships between humans and between humans and nature. It has increasingly become important to rethink our educational practices, our societies in general and critically evaluate our epistemologies and ontologies. This means rethinking the dominant values system and the current priorities. We should turn around the current situation wherein educational leaders in modern technological societies, in

particular, 'value more the learning of calculus, chemistry, and physics, than the acquisition of peacemaking skills' (Harris, 2002, p. 31). Today's educators are more than ever responsible for including and incorporating into our schools, communities and societies teaching alternatives to all forms of violence.

Education for the future should thus be about socially, economically and ecologically sustainable existence; about learning how to live with all our differences and how to live with 'the other.' The engagement with the other in terms of social justice and fairness is crucial because, as Udayakumar observes (1995, pp. 346-347), in a world where two thirds are deprived of the basics there is little prospect of peace and security.

The priority thus needs to shift towards a critical examination of futures in education, towards critical literacies, global education, peace and multicultural education. For the future, we need an educational system that values not only written texts, but also the oral tradition. We need to incorporate the emotive and relational, the ethical, and the sounds, dreams and intuition. It is an education—as David Orr (1999) paraphrasing Elie Wiesel has argued—that emphasises values, not mere theories, also consciousness over abstraction, questions over neat answers, and conscience rather than mere technical efficiency.

Such demands are not new, they have been around for decades if not centuries. But they are often diminished as 'airy-fairy,' 'utopian' and not in tune with the future. They are *passee*, in education at least. Hardly anyone talks about educational utopias anymore. We seem to be too caught up with test scores, basic skills, teacher burnout, school violence, and so-called excellence to be concerned with visions of what our schools really could be at their best. (Armstrong, 1996, para. 2)

There is thus a perception about peace education that it is apparently something 'we did in the 1980s.' Those who perceive peace education in such ways would not, of course, say the same thing about mathematics, maintaining that if we did it in the 1980s we do not need to do it again. Of course, we need to do peace education again. Each generation needs to reaffirm it, to make it anew. We have just emerged from a century where an estimated 100 million people have died in wars and even many more millions died from other forms of direct and structural violence. In the last

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decade alone more than two million children have been killed and more than six million injured or disabled in armed conflicts (Hutchinson and Fulton, 2002, p. 39). The need for peace education remains crucial for ensuring a better future.

The good news is that most educators do currently teach students to solve conflicts peacefully within the school grounds. But, as argued earlier, the dominator paradigm remains the guiding assumption behind the purpose of education. In addition, we live in a society that uses violent means to settle international disputes. So while the official discourse in schools is peaceful conflict resolution, in fact, our society tells our children that the best way to defend themselves is to attack first, or

to go get 'a bigger brother' who can do it for them. If not for other reasons, peace education should be introduced to help clarify such conflicting messages.

Some argue that, in education, we should stay focused on teaching the three Rs, practical skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Early in 2003, there were many concerns over the March 5th student strikes against Australian participation in the US-led war against Iraq. Apparently students and educational institutions should stay away from politics. But everything we do or do not do while teaching and learning is in some ways related

to politics. The argument that peace education should not be introduced into schools because it is political is faulty. This is because the decision not to teach peace education is also political. There is no way to avoiding politics in education. So it is about which political decision and which politics educators decide to take, rather than pretending to be apolitical.

Lastly, there is the argument that education for the future should predominantly be about the 'practical' (usually meaning work related) learning skills. Certainly we should continue teaching practical and useful skills—for both work and life in general—in our schools. But what is more practical than

learning how to handle our own fear and anger, how to be able to lead a self-examined life, how to repair environmental damage and how to resolve conflicts peacefully? Saying that our children should only stick to reading, writing and arithmetic diminishes their capacity as human beings, their ability to do great things in their lives. And what is greater than learning how to improve lives, health, happiness and quality of life for present and

future generations, and how to understand and care for others?

To conclude, the education we need for the future is the one that focuses on vocational and technological skills, as well as the one that promotes critical, long-term, future-oriented and holistic thinking. It is the education that utilises all our capacities as human beings, not just one type of intelligence. And above all, it is the education that teaches us how to improve our human-nature and human-human relationships.

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Knowledge

I have travelled
with my affection
along your threaded heartstrings;
I have seen the city
and the mountains there.
I, who know the flicker in each of your breaths
the flames of your hair as you sleep.
This city may falter,
these mountains lose all sense of themselves,
but already I know
how we will fill ourselves full
on the love of them -
with these old stalking stars
that corroboree across our nights
and have grown
nearly as familiar
as the fabric of your heart.

If it rains, we will know ourselves
from the inside out
into the atmosphere
making our hearts go hot,
and our bodies seem small;
see - how I know how to love,
even if you, somehow slipped off the globe
I would know who you
were, where
you are.

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