

Guest editorial

Tryggvi Thayer

The future of learning: rethinking learning in societal transformations

Education futures are increasingly prominent in global policy discourse. We might even say that the future is showing signs of becoming what Donald Schön famously referred to as an “idea in good currency”, i.e. “ideas powerful for the formation of public policy” (and, consequently, likely to attract funding) (Schön, 1970). The terminology used varies. There has been much discussion about an impending, albeit somewhat ill-defined, *fourth industrial revolution*, highlighting the need to re-evaluate what sorts of jobs today’s students will have in the future. International organisations such as OECD, UNESCO and the European Commission have implemented numerous initiatives focusing on *foresight* and *scenario construction* in education to promote forward-looking approaches in educational policymaking. EDUCAUSE continues to publish the *Horizon Reports* started by the New Media Consortium highlighting *trends and emerging technologies* that can be expected to impact education in coming years. Whatever terminology is used, there is clearly something afoot. The future of education is becoming an unavoidable component of discussions about educational policymaking and planning.

Despite all of the chatter, jargon and tomes of published policy recommendations, one group still struggles to find their role in shaping the education futures envisioned by the global policy community. These are the practitioners, i.e. the teachers, administrators and other people working in educational institutions and organisations. Reports such as UNESCO’s (2021) recent *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*, that, for example, includes an entire chapter on “Pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity” (p. 49), do not make clear how educators are expected to implement the policies suggested there. The authors make a strong case for the need to adopt new pedagogical approaches, which is unlikely to be widely disputed by people working in education. However, they do not venture into the more challenging topic of what educators need to change to accommodate these new approaches. This lack of practical direction, i.e. what educators should do to support and promote forward-looking policies, is problematic because practitioners need to be included as partners in affecting change if policymakers’ ambitions are to be realised.

Educational systems are complex systems that are notoriously difficult to change (Jonasson, 2018). Their complexity stems both from their structure, which includes transnational, national, regional and organisational components, and their intended purposes, including furthering political agendas, preserving historical and cultural knowledge and preparing societies for uncertain futures. For meaningful change to occur all of these components need to align so that the many parties involved can agree on common goals, and the means to achieve them. While this complexity affects any agendas for change, it has proven particularly challenging when the objects of concern involve uncertain educational futures. One of the issues is a general failure to problematise the future. Thayer (2019) quotes an educator that effectively sums up the challenge, stating “Thinking about the future is a luxury that I can seldom afford” (p. 144). The statement suggests that for many educators the future is not perceived as an issue of such urgency that it would take precedence over more immediate challenges. Moreover, it suggests that long-term thinking is not seen as a viable means to address what are perceived as urgent challenges, i.e. the tendency is toward quick fixes rather than addressing today’s challenges in ways that support preferred futures.

Tryggvi Thayer is based at School of Education, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland.

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In this special issue of *On the Horizon*, we focus on what educators and others involved in the daily business of providing education are doing to integrate futures perspectives into their practice. The seven papers included here describe how teachers are reshaping and redefining various aspects of their practice to be able to better prepare their learners, themselves and their organisations for uncertain futures. The topics covered include teachers' professional development, integration of futures thinking in curricula, social media and learning, enlisting learners as co-creators and co-researchers to transform learning and more. The papers also demonstrate the complexity of addressing the future in education. The challenges highlighted call for some technological solutions, but no less important are the cultural and social challenges which will not be solved with technology alone. The papers are intended to extend ongoing discourse on education futures to reach, not only policymaking domains but also the spaces in which education is delivered and learning occurs.

References

SchöN, D.A. (1970), "The loss of the stable state [radio broadcast]", *The Reith Lectures*, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, November 15.

Thayer, T. (2019), "Foresight programs for educational policy: Program participants' perceptions and experiences with outcomes", Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/209006>.

UNESCO (2021), *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Paris.

Further reading

Jónasson, J.T. (2016), "Educational change, inertia and potential futures: why is it difficult to change the content of education?", *European Journal of Futures Research*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 1-14.