Expectations and Responsibilities of Schools in the 21st Century

Prof. Richard A. Slaughter
Director, Australian Foresight Institute
Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne

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Expectations

These are easy to understand, harder to respond to. Well summarised by Colin Power, for eg. in his paper.

Responsibilities

These flow, in part, from the above, mediated by professional sense of educational mission and purpose.

How to respond? A constant challenge. Conferences like this one provide opportunities to reconsider responses.

I want to suggest a novel approach to both issues base on four key concepts:

1. The forward view.
2. Strategic foresight.
3. The civilisational challenge.
4. An integral framework of knowledge.

First take a step back.

My PhD put forward a central proposition about education: all education is inherently future-oriented. This has been accepted in principle, but it is not yet widely implemented. Explicitly future-oriented approaches are very successful when tried. But they remain uncommon. This leads to a critique of the way that schools and school systems de-focus the future. Some hints as to why can be found in John Saul's work, particularly The Unconscious Civilisation. The key to this critique is the observation that school and school systems are dominated by two sets of forces that (a) they cannot control and (b) that have no interest whatever in the future. These are:

1. Politics, and
2. Economics.

Independent schools are less directly affected by these factors (because they have greater autonomy). But they do illustrate another side to the issue. The key problem is this:
By being so deeply immersed in educational tasks, educators risk becoming bystanders, spectators of change, not actors in their own right.

To test this we can ask a simple question: how many books are written by educators about the key global issues, or about global prospects?

Across the whole educational realm I see a lack of functional capacity to understand and respond to our historical situation.

To resolve questions of expectations and responsibilities requires an evolving view of the big picture. One that includes the near-term future. How can this be achieved?

1. By seeing the point of the exercise.
2. By learning from other systems (business, corporate; eg. Apple, Nokia).
3. By creating new functional capacities in schools and school systems. This will mean writing new job descriptions.

Strategic foresight is the ability to create high-quality forward views and to use these in organisationally useful ways. This is the focus of the new courses to be offered by the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne from early 2001. It provides a context for re-skilling for a very different era.

The civilisational challenge is an interpretation of the major threats to humanity's well-being over the next 30-50 years. Factors involved include:

1. The industrial 'flatland' (a 'thin' empiricist view of reality).
2. Human impacts on the global system.
3. The ideology of continuous economic growth.
4. Technical developments that exceed society's ethical capacities.
5. Globalisation that exacerbates inequity.
6. Short-term thinking that masks all of the above.

At present schools are helpless in the face of these issues and concerns. But there are ways of coming to grips with the near-term future. A key suggestion to this group: set up your own working group on the civilisational challenge. Work on it for a sustained period. Report back to your next major conference.

I often lecture on 'challenges in the pipeline' or 'tsunamis of change'. Powerful change processes begin as ripples. They evolve into waves. Finally they create major upheavals that can wipe out whole communities. Think of the communications revolution, the rise of biotechnology and the prospect of nanotechnology in these terms: opportunities and threats at the same time.

The internet is seen as a generally good, progressive, development. But it has been oversold. We are looking at a new 'information ecology' within which there are predators. Attacks on the internet are common. Viruses multiply. New options, new dangers and
dependencies arising together. Digital data is volatile and readily lost. Most people are unaware of the fact that such data will disappear with subsequent hardware and software platforms - unless positive steps are taken to preserve it. The problem of digital continuity. We need 'data guardians', but at present the business case for this appears to be weak.

All this was put into clear focus recently in a challenging paper by US computer scientist Bill Joy. His piece was called: Why the Future Doesn't Need Us. It made a case for placing a moratorium on certain forms of technical development. It is one in a whole series of warnings about the kind of world we are heading toward.

The heart of the civilisational challenge is the imbalance between human and cultural development on the one hand and scientific and technical development on the other. One continually recapitulates earlier stages and hence evolves very slowly. The other is cumulative - it builds on earlier stages and evolves very rapidly. Moreover it is being driven by the most powerful entities on the planet - trans-national corporations.

There is no end in sight.

Hence our societies are 'driving' rapidly into a future that no-one understands, needs or is asking for. Businessmen go to Davos and get inspired about how Australia 'must get on the globalisation train'. But no-one questions where it is going or why.

Educators are perhaps the main professional/social group that need to tackle this task. It affects every aspect of their work. But (Leunig cartoon) there are so many voices, so much post-modern fragmentation. Who to listen to? Who to believe?

Ken Wilber has developed what, for me, is the most coherent post-post-modern metaperspective that we have available at this time. His 4-quadrant model provides an integrated overview of the evolution of knowledge. It hangs together and shows where things fit. It allows for developments in every field. Consequently we have:

1. Ways of understanding the evolving global context.
2. A new way to pattern and index knowledge.

Both have vital implications for schools, schooling and education generally. Moreover, in this context 21st Century responsibilities become much clearer.

1. Develop an understanding of the civilisational challenge.
2. Adapt and adopt new system functions: environmental scanning, strategic foresight.
3. Develop positive, grounded, visions of the future.
4. See technology as a means, not an end in itself.
5. Develop a major focus on balanced human, social and technical development.
6. Consider values for a viable future.
7. Create better maps of knowledge.
Strategies for moving forward include.

1. Develop 'horizon groups' (of students) within schools.
2. Convene senior policy group on the civilisational challenge.
3. Educators actively participate in mainstream major debates.
4. Take positive steps to develop proactive educational leadership.
5. Re-design and re-develop information and administrative support systems.
6. Put greater investments into teacher development and support.

Some last provocative questions.

What if those who are commonly thought to be 'leading' the country into the future are only 'minding the shop'?

What if educators began to pick up this task over the next 5 years?

I suggest that that could mean that they would be in a much stronger position to develop their own powerfully-grounded ways of mediating social expectations and clearly articulating their social responsibilities.

Richard A. Slaughter

Tel: 03 9214 5982
Email: rslaughter@swin.edu.au