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# Doing Better Than Just Falling Forward: Linking Subject Matter with Explicit Futures Thinking

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## Abstract

States justify school subjects as necessary preparations for the future. Yet, while put to heavy rhetorical use, we know little about how (if at all) teachers connect a futures dimension to their subject matter teaching and learning. A futures dimension, after all, inheres in human deliberations ranging from our everyday decisions to the more refined claims made in, for example, historical scholarship. This article examines the use of futures as a rhetorical device, how science and social studies teachers take up the future and an example of how we might include such in classrooms.

## Implicit and Assumed Futures

Gough (1990) distinguishes between tacit, token and taken-for-granted uses of the future in educational discussions and documents. *Tacit* futures are of the implied type and never clearly stated: preparation for students' future adult life would be one example (eg, we need to grade to prepare kids for the real world). *Token* futures are more visible but consist of clichés, as can be read in many conference titles and curriculum documents: "The Future Is Now" or "Education for the 21st Century" and "2020 vision." Gough notes that "[w]hen one finds 'the future' (or a futures oriented reference) in the title of an educational

document it usually means much less than might be expected" (Gough 1990, 303).

Finally, *taken-for-granted* futures are the most visible of the three. With this type, people appeal to one vision of the future rather than acknowledge its many potential paths and manifestations. We hear this view of the future when commentators declare that education must continue to serve the economy rather than the other way around. Or, again, that students require a certain set of competencies in order to thrive in the future. In this taken-for-granted use, the future unfolds as more of the same that the speaker believes to be already the case. In all these three types, the future is ever present and never questioned as to its possible, probable and preferable manifestation. Fortunately, examples exist of more explicit engagements with the future.

## Futures Education

Australia in the 1980s and '90s was a hotbed of research into young people's reasoning about the future. Findings from this body of research suggest that *despair* most accurately describes young Australians' reasoning about the future (den Heyer 2009). For example, Hutchinson's (1996) study found a stark difference between secondary students' vision of "probable" and "preferable" futures, the former expressed with words such as

*divided, unsustainable, corrupt and violent*, and the latter with words such as *demilitarized, green, peaceful and equity*. To summarize his study of Australian 15- to 24-year-olds, Eckersley (1999) writes that “the future most Australians want is neither the future they expect, nor the future they are promised. Most do not expect life in Australia to be better in 2010. They see a society driven by greed; they want one motivated by generosity” (p 77). Examining this research, Hicks (2004) importantly notes that “whilst these young people come across as quite pessimistic about the probable future, their visions of the preferable future are quite inspirational *given that they also report little time spent on these issues in school*” (p 170; emphasis added).

Here in Alberta, programs of study include a futures dimension. For example, the high school front matter of the program of social studies grounds the subject in “learning opportunities for students to develop skills ... and the capacity to inquire , make reasoned and informed judgments, and arrive at decisions for the public good” (Alberta Education 2005, 5). On the same page, the program calls for “students to become engaged and involved in their communities by listening to and collaborating and working with others *to design the future*” and “creating *new ways* to solve problems” (emphasis added). On the following page, the program hopes to have “students [strive] to understand and explain the world in the present and to determine *what kind of world they want in the future*” (emphasis added). As noted by Hicks above, the lack of school time to explicitly engage future probabilities, however, likely continues here in Alberta and elsewhere in North America. My review of educational research, in both teacher education and subject-specific areas, finds that there is an absence of the future as an explicit topic of research. In addition, discussions reported below with practising Alberta high school teachers confirm what the Australian scholar Debra Bateman found in her case study. Despite government, curriculum and even school mission statements declaring a commitment to preparing students for the future, “prior to the commencement of this study, the teachers had given little thought to the ways in which they ‘educate for the future’” (Bateman 2012, 15). Rather, teachers assumed the “future would just occur” (Bateman 2012, 18). I turn now to explore the case for explicitly taking up the future in schools.

## The Future Dimension in Everyday Thinking

A future dimension along with the present and past inheres in everyday deliberation. Social psychologists Emirbayer and Mische (1998) detail three entwined “chords” at play in human thinking: reiteration, evaluation and projectivity. For example, if asked where I would like to go on vacation, I call upon my past experience (the chord of reiteration) so as to evaluate the present options in light of the future probable and preferable outcomes (the chord of projectivity). In fact, I can clarify the present evaluation of options and my preferable projected outcome—where I might want to go or might want to do—only by attending to each of these time dimensions or chords. As I move from one to the other chord, or imagine them concurrently, overlapping, the value of one or another vacation option becomes clearer in light of my also emerging preferred vacation.

We also play these chords when we deliberate with others over an explicitly political question that requires collective action. For example, we cannot socially evaluate the present without also thinking concurrently about a past we can reference (or, rather, we reiterate our historical knowledge about such) in light of projected possible, probable and preferable futures. To exclude a futures dimension in education, therefore, not only limits students’ evaluation of their present social lives, but also their judgments about how the past they encounter in and out of schools informs present social choices and future preferable destinations. Indeed, this dimension lies as the key reason that Alberta’s program of social studies includes a specific definition of historical thinking: “historical thinking is a process whereby students are challenged to *re-think assumptions about the past and to re-imagine both the present and the future*” (Alberta Education 2005, 9, emphasis added).

## The Role of Futures in Scholarship

Cronon (1992) examines the books of two US historians published in the same year, 1979. These historians “dealt with virtually the same subject” and “had researched many of the same documents, and agreed on most of their facts, and yet their conclusions could hardly have been more different” (Cronon 1992, 1347). Taking quotations from the two books these prominent

historians wrote and summarizing their findings, Cronon illustrates his argument that every historical narrative constitutes a value-laden creation:

In the final analysis, the story of the dust bowl was the story of people, people with ability and talent, people with resourcefulness, fortitude, and courage ... They were builders of tomorrow ... Because [of] those determined people ... the nation today enjoys a better standard of living (Bonnifield, in Cronon 1992, 1348).

The Dust Bowl was the darkest moment in the twentieth-century life of the southern plains ... The Dust Bowl was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself the task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth (Worster, in Cronon 1992, 1348).

How do two well-regarded historians dealing with the same archival sources and agreed-upon facts come to such different conclusions?

The facts do not themselves contain the lessons these historians draw. Rather, each threads the facts together in narratives woven out of their present concerns that animate why they initially bothered to go to the archive: “In both cases the shape of the landscape conformed to the human narratives that were set within it and so became the terrain on which their different politics contested each other” (Cronon 1992, 1362). These historical claims emerge as much from present concerns as they do from the past itself or the evidence by which we interpret it—not just a present concern, but also a more or less explicit future toward which these historians might have hoped their work contributes. The lesson I draw here concerns the role that the future plays in scholarly and teacher quests—our hoped-for contributions to a preferred future for which we seek the past as counsel rather than a future that just occurs.

## **Current Events, Darkened Futures**

Educators promote current events in science and social studies for a host of reasons. According to the Alberta program of social studies, “ongoing reference to current affairs adds relevance, interest and immediacy to social studies issues” (Alberta Education 2005, 6). Some teachers believe that current events help distracted students caught up in the immediate world of social networking, and adolescence more

generally, encounter the important news of the day. Others draw comparisons between a past and a current event or problem being studied to provide relevance to each. Others may use current events to promote media literacy and the multiple points of view through which we can interpret any one event or controversy involving science (eg, climate change). These are all good reasons. We do need to attend, however, to several limitations in the use of current events. These became apparent in my study investigating the ways science and social studies teachers link their subject-matter teaching with a futures dimension. In this study, I conducted one-hour interviews with eight secondary teachers, asking them how they envisioned the role of futures in their subject matter teaching. A discourse analysis of interviews revealed emergent themes within each interview (each treated as a separate case study). These themes were then compared and contrasted across cases to reveal more comprehensive or inclusive themes (Limberg 2008). Another researcher verified the descriptive reasonableness of themes identified and supporting interview data.

For Mj, current events give the past, but not the future, relevance:

Mj (second-year social studies teacher): I was able to make the link between the Ukraine crisis and the French revolution thanks to a tidy [newspaper] article that someone wrote who said “just as in 1789 ...” Unfortunately people are dying in this revolution as well, but for me as a teacher I am always trying to make it relevant for my students. I mean these kids might find it [the past] boring, [so] why are we talking about this? So it is important to make those links.

Mj points to a common use of current events that all interviewees share and that reflects its justification for inclusion in the program of social studies. Lacking a futures dimension, however, this use of current events just as likely paints a picture of an already determined and unchanging present as much as the events’ analogous relevance.

One unexpected finding in this study was the extent to which the absence of a future dimension abandons students to a further sense of a deeply distressed present:

Bill (22 years teaching social studies): If there is discussion about future then it’s probably all doomsday stuff, you know all the glaciers will melt and we will all die of something bad. That

is probably how the future is dealt with in social studies, in a fairly negative way. If I am teaching current events and trying to explain how the world ended up this way and why it will turn out in one way rather than another then there is a lot of negative. It is hard sometimes. It is like a newspaper, you know, it's all bad news. There is a lot of bad news and maybe that is what we all collectively do in our classrooms.

Here Bill points to the possibility that while the content of a current event may change, the tone and depiction of a troubled present remain the same. This use of current events to explain “why [the world] will turn out one and not another way” forecloses both the future as a relatively open time-space and exploration of more hopeful possibilities, likely contributing to students’ despair about preferable futures as noted in the Australian studies summarized above.

From this study, it seems that the future consists in these classrooms, at best, as a type of “what if?” musing:

KdH: Are you linking these events to future probabilities or future outcomes?

Mj: Just through discussion. We might talk about what does society look like if we do this or that. But it's only through informal discussion. If the discussion doesn't lend itself to that question, I don't go there ... We try to make a wee bit of a connection to “what if?” and that's about as far as we go with the future.

Jyle speaks to the present difficulty of getting beyond this type of “what if?” musing:

KdH: Do you get students to consider the future probabilities of, say, racism that you mentioned as one of your concerns as both a citizen and teacher?

Jyle (an eight-year social studies teacher): No, not usually, because that is a much harder kind of idea to get to. Usually, in lieu of asking them to consider the future and where our choices could lead, I will give them an example of where we might be going. You know, like, “Are we going to continue down this path ... about how we classify each other?” It gives them a little to think about as they go forward.

For Martha, a 17-year social studies teacher, the future's horizon in her teaching extends only to the end of the school year:

Martha: We don't focus on the future. We focus on the now and the yesterday. That is far as I go. When I start with the kids on the 30th of January, guess what I'm focusing on? The 14th of June! Because that's when their diploma [exam] is.

Later in the interview, Martha observes that perhaps this emphasis needs to be expanded:

We do think about the future in a personal perspective; but so rarely do we think about it in a cognitive or political or historical perspective.

I read Martha's comment as speaking to our profession's emphasis on helping individual students to succeed (as if such success does not require a broadly considered social analysis) that narrows possible foci on social futures:

Mj: This semester, I have former AP [advanced placement] kids. Their sense of the probable and preferable future is very different from the kids I taught last year. Like last year they [those students] are not going to university. They are going to work in trades or restaurants but is that what they want for themselves, is that their preferable? I don't know, but they don't know anything different, right?

Kate's thought captures well these insights into both the paucity of explicit subject-matter futures and a cultural reflex to speak of the future in individualistic terms:

KdH: What role does the future play in your teaching?

Kate (eight years teaching secondary science): I've never thought to ask them about the future. I only thought to present information as it exists now and look at historical trends. The only time we talked about the future [was] to communicate that they're in it as the primary focus and I'm not. It has to be a torch passing. That's the only time.

In this way, we limit the future's unfolding to the potential horizon of the personal and individual, not a question requiring a collective analysis and shaping. Where, then, are student opportunities to connect content knowledge to futures more broadly and explicitly considered?

## Scenario Reasoning

Given its lack of explicit and open investigation in teachers' classrooms, how might we promote and take

up a futures dimension linked to subject matters? I will take the case of history, which many people think is about the past. This despite evidence noted by Cronon above that the past is only known through those histories we write or speak to convey some lesson for a hoped-for future. Rather than directed to the past, historian David Staley (2002) argues that teachers could develop students' historical reasoning equally well by having them articulate future scenarios. Scenarios differ from predictions: "Where a prediction is a definitive statement about what will be, scenarios are heuristic narratives that explore alternative plausibilities of what might be" (Staley 2002, 78).

Having students think about future scenarios calls upon their historical reasoning in terms of both subject content and historical thinking skills as articulated by the US National Standards for History: "to raise questions and to marshal solid evidence in support of their answers"; to "create historical narratives and arguments of their own"; and to "examine the interpretive nature of history" (National Center for History in the Schools nd). Staley invites us to consider the ways we might enhance historical thinking by exploring arguments about future probabilities. Our collective hope for a preferable rather than just a probable future requires that we extend our engagement with students beyond simply arriving at reasonable judgments about some past incident to include creativity and desirous imaginings animated by the study of future possibilities.

Like any disciplinary study, scenario work begins with clearly articulated questions that emerge out of a classroom, school or the community's pressing issues of concern, to which the Alberta program explicitly calls upon teachers and students to attend. Such questions are "throughline" questions (den Heyer 2009b). I distinguish throughlines from essential questions. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) define an essential question as "a question that lies at the heart of a subject or a curriculum ... and promotes inquiry and uncoverage of a subject" (p 342). Rather than questions at the heart of a subject, throughlines are provocative questions that call for ethical responses requiring multidisciplinary frames of analysis as found in social and science studies. Such questions might range from the more local to the more general; from "To what extent, if at all, will bullying continue in our school?" to "What is the future of the Arctic and of the Inuit people there in regards to land claims, hunting rights and sovereignty?"

After identifying their throughline questions, teachers and students scan the environment looking for what

is called "driving forces" that are "key factors that will determine (or 'drive') the outcome of the scenario" (Staley 2002, 79). Here, "evidence" is identified in much the same way that historians work with artefacts from the past to explain events: "Like evidence from the past, evidence for the future is not intrinsically evident. It is made evidence by the historian's mind acting upon it" (Staley 2002, 84). Sources of evidence include current events and a range of media in which teacher and students identify a driving force necessary to take into account in constructing scenarios. Here the past becomes meaningful both as (a) an indicator of past experiences and influences of driving forces and (b) differing interpretations of said driving forces and their plausible future outcomes. Of course, also considered are the unpredictable influences on the issue played by human agency, accident and uncontrollable environmental conditions.

Once a question has been identified, the present environment scanned for driving forces and historical content introduced by the teacher as potential analogies, students write the story of each scenario (Staley, in his review of the literature on scenario writing, suggests a minimum of three. I suggest *possible*, *probable*, and *preferable* to emphasize the future's malleability). Each scenario has a plot that "describes a different, but equally likely, logic of the future":

The narrative of each scenario does not describe a linear procession of events ("this will happen on this date, then this will happen"). Rather, the scenario is a description of the context within which those events may occur (Staley 2002, 84).

Once articulated, scenarios—and the historical interpretations used to support their plausibility—also provide opportunities for students to distinguish between probable and preferable futures. Such a discussion provides students practice with articulating their ethical commitments as agents of future social life.

## Summation

A future dimension inheres in our everyday decisions and our more refined disciplinary judgments. Yet, the future's presence in these deliberations likely lacks explicit attention in schools, as evinced by the absence of the question in North American educational scholarship and studies confirming that the future, while invoked by various official documents, remains unexamined. In my study with eight excellent

practising secondary teachers, none thought to tie a student exploration of our collective futures to their subject matter. Rather, the future exists either as “what if?” musings or is limited to a concern for their students’ personal work and academic outcomes.

Understandably, teachers feel pressed to trace a path from the past to present or explain analogous realities between the two. In doing so, we also likely convey an unintended message that the present inevitably followed a single path from that past, akin to the ways some speak of the “taken-for-granted” future as an already given. Absent a futures dimension, teachers’ use of current events can reinforce students’ already existing taken-for-granted pictures of “just the way it is/as it has always been/will always be.” Current events are useful, of course, but perhaps less than we think without an explicit exploration of those currents in which these events flow between past, present and possible futures. Without such an exploration, perhaps the cumulative effect is to heap another event on the pile of “one damn thing after another” under which many students despair for their preferable visions of our shared social future.

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