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EDITORIAL



Who is ‘competent’ to shape lifelong education’s future?

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Lifelong education practice and research are about important processes but also generate visions of what those processes should be and lead to. Many are drawn to the field of lifelong education because of traditions that have articulated visions of adults and their communities as capable of growth, emancipation and empowerment, and look to educational policies, systems, institutions, and programmes in terms of how they can foster those visions. For critical researchers and practitioners the field is complicated by the efforts of well-resourced transnational organisations that make lifelong education and learning a special theme in their policy work. Some of these organisations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), have been responsible for policies that resonate with the humanist and critical traditions of lifelong education (e.g. Faure, 1972). However, in recent years there has been a convergence of policy work among transnational organisations – including UNESCO, as well as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF) – that points to a different vision of lifelong education. A shift seems to be taking place marked by more strident envisioning of a particular industrial future on the one hand, and a certain specification of the how and what of educational systems to get us there.

Examples of this kind of thinking include the UNESCO’s *Education 2030* agenda, OECD’s *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project, the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) *Education 4.0* initiative and work by private think-tanks like McKinsey & Company, and national government agencies such as Australia’s Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). The flavour of this kind of work can be sampled from the OECD’s background note on the *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project:

The future, by definition, is unpredictable; but by being attuned to some of the trends now sweeping across the world we can learn – and help our children learn – to adapt to, thrive in and even shape whatever the future holds. Students need support in developing not only knowledge and skills but also attitudes and values, which can guide them towards ethical and responsible actions. At the same time, they need opportunities to develop their creative ingenuity to help propel humanity towards a bright future. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019, p. 2)

There is much to applaud in this note – after all, it is a bright future for humanity that is sought – but an important point is the locus of direction in ‘attunement to trends’ in the present. UNESCO’s series of ‘normative documents’ supporting its *Education 2030* agenda offers another taste of the same trend, pointing out, in relation to a ‘paradigm shift’ guiding the ‘repositioning of curriculum’,

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... the reality that the global Education 2030 Agenda will mostly be implemented within Industry 4.0, and this implementation context can hardly be ignored. ... [T]o support development, curricula must enable learners (young and old) to acquire competences for effective uptake of opportunities and for effective addressing of challenges across fast changing, and sometimes disruptive 21st-century development contexts. Industry 4.0 is fully acknowledged as a formidable accelerant of change and complexity in the 21st century, and as having significant implications for curricula. (UNESCO, 2019, p. 7)

Here again, a sense of present ‘reality’ as the stage of the emergence of ‘Industry 4.0’ forms the horizon of the future. An explicit conceptualisation of the basis for confidence in futures planning is found in documents supporting another UNESCO project which already seeks to move ‘beyond the 2030 agenda’. The ‘about’ note on the *Futures of Education* initiative explains how the future is appraised:

UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative ... approaches the future as a space for democratic design that is connected to, but not limited by, past and present. It builds on dedicated evidence-based trend analysis that can help shine light on anticipated challenges and opportunities. (UNESCO, 2021)

This statement points to the basis of futures thinking – analysis of present trends – but also grasps the future as material for design work. This idea of the future as a space to be designed now, and attuned to present trends, is echoed in the WEF’s ‘platforms’, or ‘activities tackling the most significant global challenges through public-private collaboration’ (<https://www.weforum.org/platforms>). Sixteen of their 18 platforms have titles that begin with ‘Shaping the Future of ...’ For example, there is the ‘Shaping the Future of Digital Economy and New Value Creation’ platform, and the ‘Shaping the Future of Consumption’ platform. One platform of particular interest for lifelong education researchers is ‘Shaping the Future of the New Economy and Society’, in connection with which are numerous initiatives, including the *Education 4.0* project. The project draws on a framework set out in the ‘Schools of the Future’ report which sets out the rationale for *Education 4.0*:

The standardized model of direct learning widely used in mainstream education today was largely influenced by the needs of the First and Second Industrial Revolutions, when the mass production of uniform talent was used to fill repetitive, process-oriented early manufacturing jobs. Although most education systems have continued to operate business-as-usual, innovation has driven economies toward new models of productivity. The Third and Fourth Industrial Revolutions introduced production automation and intangible value creation. These new drivers of growth created massive shifts in the skills required to contribute to the economy and the ways in which people work, raising questions about the adequacy of current education systems in keeping pace with these changes. (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020)

Pausing to reflect on these messages from the OECD, UNESCO and WEF, there is an obvious tension between the idea that change is ubiquitous, perhaps even accelerating, and our patently limited ability to see the future. There is ample commentary on this point, for instance, in Peetz’s (2020) remarks on government job and skills forecasting:

In the research I have done on the future of work, several things are clear. The further you look ahead, the less useful the present is as a guide. This is especially the case in employment because, in a quickly changing world, technology is hard to predict and changing consumption patterns even harder. (Peetz, 2020)

However, the paradox inherent in futures thinking by OECD, UNESCO and WEF is not necessarily a problem. Future-orientation is not at issue here. As acknowledged in the opening of this editorial, lifelong education research and practice is distinctive for espousing visions of the future. But there is a difference between an orientation to the future that aims to give people and communities the resources, knowledge and skills to determine their own lives – an enabling attitude that shows through in the work of Lindemann (1926) and Freire (1970) for example – and an orientation that already ‘knows’ what people will have to contend with (e.g. Industry 4.0) and what ‘competences’ they will need when they get there. It is a readiness to ‘design’ that future rather than leaving that work to future adults. Along with this stance of proprietorship over the future are definite ideas about

the means of securing that goal. For example, as part of its ‘Reskilling Revolution’ initiative, the WEF proposes a ‘Common Skills Taxonomy’ to structure education globally for the future workforce. As a ‘first step toward making skills the currency of the labour market’, the document explains that

Aligning on a common language for skills will enable businesses to more rapidly and effectively identify the right talent to fill emerging roles needed for businesses to flourish. In fact, a study found that using a skills-based approach to hiring predicted job success for entry-level employees five times better than degree requirements.

A global skills taxonomy may also enable greater intra- and cross-industry collaboration on redeployment efforts – efficiency that is much needed in the context of large-scale unemployment caused in part by COVID-19. Furthermore, a common taxonomy will enable learning providers to more effectively deliver on training needs to prepare talent for the future of work. (WEF, 2021, p. 6)

The basis of this taxonomy will be ‘competencies’, conceived as a ‘Collection of skills, knowledge, attitudes and abilities that enable an individual to perform job roles’ (2021, p. 7). Further, ‘Given that the taxonomy is to be used in the context of jobs, skills and knowledge have been combined for this framework.’

What is striking about this blueprint for educating the future workforce is how familiar it all sounds. For instance, despite decades of criticism of competency-based education and training for fostering inequality, undermining creativity, deskilling educators, fragmenting bodies of knowledge, and promulgating narrow specifications of work which, when scaled up, can become mired in cumbersome revision processes (Ashworth & Saxton, 1990; Hodge et al., 2016; Wheelahan, 2007), the World Economic Forum persists with the model. Furthermore, the structure of competencies – skills and knowledge, attitudes and abilities – reiterates Bloom and colleagues’ Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom et al., 1956), and its division between cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains. A venerable educational heritage appears to sit behind the World Economic Forum’s ‘Global Taxonomy’ which is positioned as the basis of the ‘reskilling revolution’.

Interestingly, a similar picture emerges in the OECD and UNESCO documents for educational futures. Part of the OECD’s *Future of Education and Skills 2030* initiative is agreement on a ‘learning compass’ which emerged from the second phase of the initiative, the first focused ‘on “what” questions – what kinds of competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes and values) today’s students need to thrive in and shape the future for better lives and for individual and societal well-being’ (2019, p. 8). The second phase focused ‘on “how” questions – how to design learning environments that can nurture such competencies, i.e. how to implement curricula effectively’ (2019, p. 8). The outcome of this questioning is the compass. It explains that ‘Just as a compass orients a traveller, the OECD Learning Compass 2030 indicates the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values students need not just to weather the changes in our environment and in our daily lives, but to help shape the future we want’ (OECD, 2019, p. 15). This compass was the product of consultation with hundreds of people, from curriculum experts and business representatives through to young people, yet for all that resorts to a competency-based model. UNESCO’s normative documents on a ‘global paradigm shift’ in curriculum thinking likewise call for a competency-based approach. The new paradigm will involve reconceptualisation of curriculum along ‘key dimensions’ the first of which is – presumably an object rather than a dimension – ‘the first operational tool for ensuring the sustained development-relevance of education and learning systems’. The second normative document elaborates:

Accepting the first dimension for the reconceptualization of curriculum therefore compels the adoption of a competence-based approach to curriculum. It is through the curriculum that societies identify and package required competences into relevant and fulfilling learning experiences for children, youth, and adults. As education systems realize the power of curriculum as a tool for development-relevance, efforts to reorient curricula toward competence-based approaches have gained momentum. An escalating number of countries have undertaken or are in the process of curricula reforms toward competence-based approaches. (UNESCO, 2019, p. 16)

The document presents an analysis of ‘current contributions’ to this escalating process which finds that competence is ‘far more complex than skill, and that it comprises knowledge, skills, values and attitudes’ (UNESCO, 2019, p. 19). So UNESCO not only advocates a competency-based approach to future curricula but would structure them according to the time-honoured template of domains. It is reported that a ‘fair measure of consensus’ exists on what competencies are ‘considered essential for inclusion in curricula’:

- Creativity, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, curiosity, metacognition;
- Digital, technology, and ICTs skills;
- Basic, media, information, financial, scientific literacies and numeracy;
- Cross-cultural skills, leadership, global awareness;
- Initiative, self-direction, perseverance, responsibility, accountability, adaptability; and
- Knowledge of disciplines, STEM mindset. (UNESCO, 2019, p. 20)

This list, like many of the other perspectives on the future of curriculum we have considered, has a familiar ring to it. These ‘competencies’ have been espoused, especially by business leaders, for decades. Yet it is presented as self-evidently valid, despite critical debate starting in the 1980s which contested the possibility of basing educational efforts upon such ambiguous statements (Ennis, 1989; McPeck, 1985) rather than knowledge contexts include not only mathematics but also history and literature. Worthy of remark here is the inclusion of the final competency – STEM mindset – which itself reflects a valuation of particular subjects over others, or surprisingly specific content as distinct from the generic processes reflected in the other competencies.

The convergence of recent educational UNESCO, OECD and WEF policy work raises questions for lifelong education researchers. First, how can we account for this convergence and what is its significance? Why is it that diverse transnational organisations strike upon similar perspectives on the future and how to equip adults for it? In particular, how has ‘Industry 4.0’ come to be broadly accepted as a ‘reality’ that should guide educational thinking well into the future? Second, how deep does this convergence go? As we noted, for many years, UNESCO’s has been thought to espouse a more generous and ‘humane’ approach. Has this really disappeared? Third, why has the future been conceptualised as material for design? This is a perspective that was absent from earlier UNESCO, OECD and WEF policy work. It is as though the future has been recognised as a resource awaiting exploitation. Fourth, why the resurgence of interest in competence-based education systems and the persistence of traditional taxonomies as orienting devices? In a sense, this question is warranted by the dynamic language of curricular paradigm shifts and skill revolutions that infuses these policies. So why, in the context of a desire for fresh educational thinking, are old and some would say debunked approaches to learning advanced as the platform for future education? These are poignant questions for researchers inspired by the visions of Lindemann and Freire who may wish to reserve the future as a space of design for those who will inhabit it, and give citizens of that future critical facilities and a rich, open knowledge base as a heritage whose uses should not decreed in advance. Critical lifelong education researchers are especially well-placed to ask these questions.

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