

Future scenarios in the context of global and local dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Schooling nowadays experiences the dilemma between two forces: on the one hand, a trend towards a global homogenisation which brings people and countries closer than ever, and on the other hand, the affirmation of what is specific and particular. This tension obviously has implications on curriculum decision-making: are we concerned with the education of the citizen for a globally patterned culture or for a particular cultural identity? Or why aren't we concerned with both?

This paper invites teachers to be actively aware of these trends and anticipate them by using a technique called "Scenario Planning". Four different possible scenarios are drawn on which Manuel, a fourteen-year old Portuguese student, will appear.

INTRODUCTION: GLOBAL AND LOCAL DYNAMICS.

According to some contemporary curriculum theorists (Apple, 1990, 1999; Beyer & Liston, 1996; Moreira & Silva, 1995; Pinar, 1975; Silva, 2000), the curriculum is not politically neutral. "There is an increasing accumulation of evidence that the institution of schooling itself is not a neutral enterprise in terms of its economic outcomes. [...] they (schools) also seem to act as powerful agents in the economic and cultural reproduction of class relations in a stratified society like our own." (Apple, 1990, p. 8). The issues of "How to teach" and "What to teach" are strategically linked to "Teach for what", that is to say, to the political intentions of socialisation and development. How can this overall principle be affected by two different trends we're living at the present time, each one of them pulling us towards opposite directions? This is the problem the tension between global and local dynamics presents to the education in general. Let's see how.

We are living at a time of accelerated technological change particularly at the level of information and communication. The new technologies have opened up virtual routes across the world giving a new order to the Global Village. From the point of view of someone living in Portugal, I can say I'm witnessing the welcoming of European Union to new countries and the use of a unique European currency, the Euro, since January 1st 2002. It's obvious this political and economic measure intends to make us members of a community greater than our particular country. And this feeling of belonging to a major structure doesn't only concern the European Union: foreign investment pours in our countries along with McDonald's, Hollywood movies and CNN real-time global news if we speak of American pressure on day-to-day life.

But at the same time this sort of globalisation has brought people and countries closer than ever, it has shown us, and in a very cruel way, the tremendous differences among them. (UNDP, 2000). "More than a quarter of the 4,5 billion people in developing countries still do not have some of life's most basic choices – survival beyond age 40, access to knowledge and minimum private and public services. Nearly 1,3 billion people do not have access to clean water. A one in seven child of primary school age is out of school. About 840 million are malnourished. An estimated 1,3 billion people live on incomes of less than \$1 (US\$) a day." (UNDP, 1999, p. 28).

The previous well ordered East-West division, which characterised the political cold war reality, is now substituted by another sort of division, a much more complex one determined by cultural, ethnic and religious matters. That's why I think that parallel to the global dynamics, there's another contrary trend strongly affirming specific spaces where common lives, experiences and stories are shared, giving birth to a certain identity. If it is true that migrating waves of population contributed to globalisation, it is also true that they stressed the colours of the differences on the planet's cultural mosaic.

People travel much more today than ever before. And we don't travel only for reasons of tourism. Migration in search of better living standards, flight from war and political persecution, homeward return of colonisers from new independent countries or natural disasters, mobility of students and researchers from one country to another are increasingly contributing to cultural diversity in what would previously have been more homogeneous spaces. Australia, Canada and the United States have adopted programmes, which seek to attract skilled migrants thereby contributing

to a brain drain from developing countries. As many 30,000 African PhDs now live abroad (UNDP, 1999).

Geographical and cultural spaces are nowadays affirming themselves in searching for an autonomy that allows them to solve their own specific problems in a more rapid and efficient way. New countries were born by the dismemberment of others, side by side with many others that, although not independent or autonomous yet, are laying claim to the recognition of their own specificity and particularity (may be their “tribalization”).

Whereas the dominant politics in the past tended to limit and suppress diversity in the interest of maintaining a supposed “commonality”, in more recent years we have witnessed a certain tone of acceptance and even an encouragement of “being different”.

How can this sort of analysis acknowledging the tension between the global and the local dynamics be of significance to education in general and to teaching in particular? How can the dilemma facing societies in terms of globalisation and/or identity affirmation affect the individual school? And how does this dilemma become the dilemma of the Curriculum?

PROJECTION INTO THE FUTURE WITH THE SCENARIO PLANNING

In my opinion, dealing with the future has to be a routine for those who are educators and particularly those who make decisions on Curriculum. As a matter of fact, educational problems have to be placed in terms of next generations: which sort of citizens do we want in order to shape the society of tomorrow?

Making use of “Scenario planning” (Dutch Central Planning Bureau, 1992; GBN, 1998; Schwartz, 1991; Wilkinson, 1995), we can practise our thinking strategically about future. It’s a methodology used by large organisations and industries to face great structural change which carry uncertainty in order to avoid, or at least minimise, eventual risks.

The scenarios are actually short stories about possible futures, which use creativity, insight and intuition to establish a foundation for robust and flexible strategies. A good scenario is not necessarily the one which portrays the future accurately but the one which exposes our minds to diverse and challenging ideas and perspectives and makes us explore emerging issues. “Scenario planning derives from the observation that, given the impossibility of knowing precisely how the future will play out, a good decision or strategy to adopt is one that plays out well across several possible futures.” (Wilkinson, 1995, p. 2). That is why the scenarios presented are plural, each one diverging markedly from the others and modelling a distinct plausible world in which we might someday have to live and work.

Since the scenarios aim to understand the forces shaping the future, what we have to do is to make these forces tangible. So, we have to assemble our uncertainties in the quadrants created by the crossing of two or three axes, as on a matrix. That’s what I propose here (Table 1): for the vertical axis, I’ve chosen the dynamics of Globalisation and Fragmentation; for the horizontal axis, I’ve adopted Competition and Solidarity as two other driving forces, which pull the future in

different directions. The new information technologies are seen as being common to every quadrant, based on recent reports and studies on educational technology (Assembleia da República, 2002; Bialo & Sivin-Kachala, 1997).

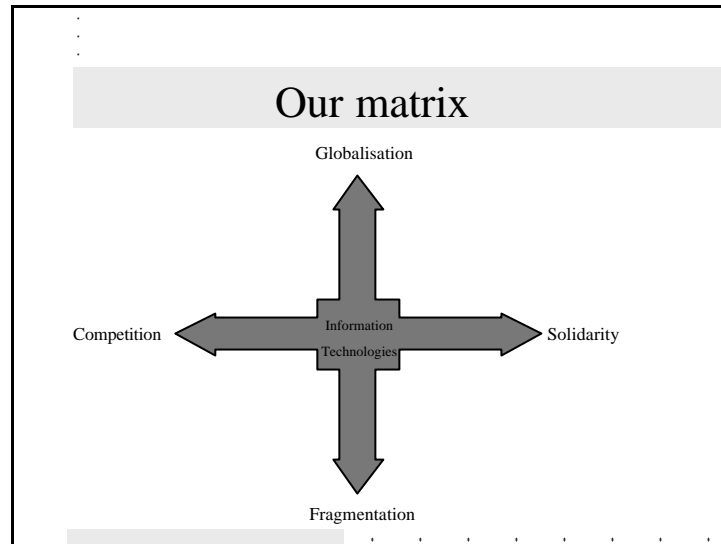


Table 1

Each scenario can be a logical possible future to be explored more (until the idea has been exhausted) or less, according to the work situation and the time available for that. Having this matrix on mind, how will Manuel, a young 14-year-old boy living in Madeira Island, Portugal, spend his days?

1. A FIRST POSSIBLE SCENARIO: GLOBALISATION AND COMPETITION

Manuel is an adolescent growing up like many others who also go to his school. From his potential learning time, he spends only some 19% of it at school in any year. The remaining 81% of his time are spent in front of a screen, either watching TV, linked to the Internet, or playing video games. His teachers are aware that the starting points for many of his learning processes at school come from the world that surrounds him. The so called “nearest”, “familiar” and “concrete” of Manuel and many of his peers’ world is what daily comes into their homes through television and the Internet. Contrary to what had happened to his parents and grand-parents, Manuel’s real cultural roots have been forged less in the interaction with his immediate physical environment, and more in the interaction with the American, Brazilian and Japanese cultures, the languages of which he has been familiar with since the first years of his life.

At school he is expected to have a high performance in terms of creative work, and he is ranked according to the scores he receives. His teachers and his school are also ranked at a national level. There is a rumour about that tests of European Competence will be introduced by a European Assessment Board from next year onwards.

Portuguese lessons do not allow time for the study of Madeiran poets, though Saramago has become a compulsory subject. European history and the study of classical antiquity prevail over

the history of Viriato and Sertório. There is no time at all for the study of the Revolts in Madeira. Maths and English are the core disciplines in the curriculum. Students work at home or in neighbourhood centres with online services, video-conferencing, computer conferencing and advanced software.

The traditional division between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ has now been transformed into a division between those who use and benefit from the information technologies and those who are technologically illiterate.

2. A SECOND POSSIBLE SCENARIO: GLOBALISATION AND SOLIDARITY

The technology used at Manuel’s “school” serves the ideals of an inclusive community by facilitating participatory processes in learning. The classrooms of those “learning centres” are well supplied with teaching resources, information databases, software and telecommunications services. They bear little resemblance to the traditional rooms with a large teacher’s desk facing straight rows of desks. Teachers are no longer the fonts of all knowledge and no longer act as the “sage on the stage”, but rather perform the functions of the “guide on the side”. They are there to facilitate group intellectual work and to make sure that students ask the right questions and have the resources necessary to answer them. Teaching is focused on questions rather than on answers.

Electronic networks create new forms of communities and permit convenient ways of meeting online. Manuel has met wonderful people sharing the same interests, news and events. The concept of community has changed. It doesn’t just include physically close neighbours but includes all those with whom Manuel is connected wherever they may be in the world. Manuel’s electronic family is characterised by diversity. Unlike earlier communities of immigrants and ethnic enclaves, these electronic communities are diverse and the world seems to have lost all distance. Manuel looks to his electronic friends for information about exotic places, and has already asked for Mexican food recipes for his mother because he loves new tastes. He is a fan of Beethoven and Arabian music.

The curriculum allows space for the myths and histories of other countries and encourages students to understand and respect one another. School councils promote cross-cultural understanding where teachers and parents share the responsibility for setting their overall direction.

3. A THIRD POSSIBLE SCENARIO: FRAGMENTATION AND COMPETITION

As someone flying over an agricultural area might see the greens and yellows and browns of cultivated fields, an aerial perspective on Manuel’s town would let us see communities sharply divided by social differences. Africans are divided, as per the earlier Portuguese colonies, into enclaves from Cabo Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea, Angola and Mozambique, which, in turn, are further divided into black and white ghettos, or into the religious groupings of Catholics, Methodists and Muslims. Madeirans and Açoreans are located with people from the North of Portugal. Asians are splintered into zones for Chinese, Macaoists, Indians (Hindus and Muslims) and Goans (all of whom are Catholic as a rule). There are residential areas for gays, environmentally concerned citizens and interracial couples. The gypsies haven’t settled yet.

Within this scenario the very concept of “public” is, itself, in crisis. There is no public school. Each of the communities has its own school. More than any other institution, the schools symbolise local values and lifestyles. There are Methodist schools, Catholic schools, and Indian schools, schools for the children of ecologically conscious parents... As one would expect, children in Indian schools learn about Indian history alongside Portuguese history. They’re taught in Hindi or Gujarati and only occasionally in Portuguese. Part of every day is set aside for meditation. Students learn the story of Hare Krishna and are schooled for the “Om” (perfection) and the “Atman” (knowledge). As with other ethnocentric communities, cultural learning is very important. In this cultural fragmentation, each ethnic group seeks schools and online services that serve their own needs best. Everyone gets the training and the education he or she wants when and where he or she wants it. Each community tries to be better than the neighbouring community.

4. A FOURTH POSSIBLE SCENARIO: FRAGMENTATION AND SOLIDARITY

In the morning Manuel takes the bus together with Mario, Ahmed, Ling-Chung and Rosalie to go to their science school. In the afternoon he attends the music school with some neighbourhood friends: Lourdes, Joshua, Marina and Vítor. In his learning activities he values his own cultural roots without minimising his peers’ customs and traditions.

From the 10th year of their education, students may choose which schools they want to attend: some offer help for students with specific learning problems, others give extra training in one or another specialised area. There are schools for foreign language training, schools for music, schools for science, for arts and for sport. Within one school, some students may attend lessons in the morning and evening while others may prefer intensive work in the afternoon. There are also schools that use increasingly sophisticated databases to deliver instruction and counselling to students in their homes, when they are ill or can’t go to school for whatever reason. Learning may be provided to individual students at multiple sites, while many can access the same online resources at the same time.

Manuel’s youngest brother meets his grandfather everyday, because elementary school integrates kindergarten and lifelong programs for elderly citizens. Some interesting synergies occur. Adults are a valuable resource to the school community since they can help teachers to provide more individualised instruction to students with learning difficulties. Likewise, students can offer adults help in using new technologies.

CONCLUSION

I’ve tried to combine the dynamics of globalisation and fragmentation with those of competition and solidarity. I know I have exaggerated some traits in giving these scenarios a near-caricature quality, but this was done purposely, highlighting some trends already at work in the present. Whether globalisation, fragmentation, competition or solidarity come to dominate, it is too early to say. But my idea with this paper is to stress how important it is for the teachers to be actively aware of existing forces, even when they are not explicit, because “the curriculum is not an innocent and neutral element of uninterested transmission of social knowledge” (Moreira & Silva, 1995, p. 8). If we could add a future dimension to the reflexive attitude I consider vital to the real professional, sharing the idea of the “reflective practitioner” (Schön, 1983; Zeichner, 1993), may be

our teachers could be better prepared to participate in the design of the curriculum. That's why I think we should use the technique of "Scenario Planning" demonstrated above, with all the limitations of a paper of this nature, in the initial and in-service teacher training programmes. How to implement that? Well, the answer would demand another paper.

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