GREAT TRANSITION INITIATIVE (GTI)

The Pedagogy of Transition: Educating for the Future We Want

Concluding essay in response to Discussion Forum - by Stephen Sterling

This discussion has been exceptionally rich. A total of fifty-six contributions have been made, yielding more than 60, 000 words of insight and keen intellectual inquiry arising from engaged hearts, deep reflection, and often, long experience. According to the GTI, it has 'definitely been one of the most active discussions we've had to date'. The quality and quantity of responses are indicative of the criticality and timeliness of the topic, and of its unequivocal relevance to the chances of securing the Great Transition in conditions of unprecedented urgency.

I am most grateful to all those who have given such cogent and helpful accounts of their experience and thinking, and who have shone light on so many aspects of this multidimensional theme.

A necessary start is simply to acknowledge the scope of the topic. Its depth and breadth were reflected in the broad parameters that the discussion assumed and shaped. These foci and spectra were more or less addressed:

- the individual learner → the learning prospects of entire societies
- specific/localised learning experiences → whole educational institutions
- educational institutions and settings → entire educational systems
- formal education → social learning movements and communities
- the worldview/paradigm of individual learners and educators →the context of the socio-cultural worldview/paradigm
- older conceptions of the nature of education →the influence of the neo-liberal model and the exposition of alternatives
- current practical exemplars →proposals and potent ideas
- philosophy, reflection and analysis →practice and action

I am very aware that I cannot do proper justice to this richness here. With space at a premium, I cannot include any of the numerous perceptive lines that were potential quotes. Instead, have used bullets to indicate a significant sample of key points in the analysis below, and invite readers to follow up by reading those sources which are of interest. My apologies if I have misconstrued or poorly placed any proponent's argument.

In order to structure this short reflection, I decided to utilise the principle stages typical of strategic thinking:

1. Where we are now (state of play)? – ***recognition and re-appraisal***
2. In what ways is this state satisfactory or unsatisfactory? – ***analysis and critique***
3. Where do we need to be? – ***vision and grounding***
4. How do we effect meaningful change? – ***strategy and design***

These are of course interrelated but provide a useful framework on which to outline some of the many key ideas which emerged over the month's duration of discussion (March 2021).

1. Recognition and re-appraisal

The answer to the first question (as in any movement for change) is critical to the possibility of going forward, and the trajectory that might then be sought. The word 'recognition' (or, I suggest, 're-cognition') is key here. For many people the parlous state of the world and the planet which supports all life is, despite mounting incontrovertible evidence, still not fully recognised and acknowledged. Then too, the state of education, its purposes, policies and practices as manifested across most of the Western and Westernised world are seen as norms, and most debate takes place *within* these accepted parameters, without reference to the planetary context.

Understanding these 'states of play' requires a deep perspective with regard to analysis and finding pattern, and this is what the discussion brought forth. The critical reflexivity so lacking in much educational discourse flourished in this conversation. A question addressed by many of the discussants was 'how we got to this place', both in socio-ecological terms and with regard to prevailing ideas and practice in education.

Importantly – both in my opening essay and expanded by a number of discussants – 'education' was seen not as a separate domain, but a subsystem of society. As such it is ideally seen (and practised) as part of the cultural shift and effort that is so urgently needed, and which is summed up in the term 'social learning'. However, the converse side of this relationship was also made clear in the commentaries: formal education systems have been and are shaped by the prevailing cultural worldview, and material pressures and expectations deriving from social norms. The role of the dominant paradigm(s) in society and reflected in education was seen as absolutely key to understanding why things are as they are, including the damaging overlay of neoliberalism and marketisation distorting the conception and practice of education over recent decades.

2. Analysis and critique

There was much common ground on this theme, including universal subscription to the importance and critical role that education in all its forms must play in transition, but also to the reality that its agency role depends on transformative systemic change. However, there was a little tension between perspectives. Some held that mainstream education is so locked into values and norms that are now untenable that it is virtually irredeemable, not

'response-able,' and never will be the agency of cultural transformation that it needs to aspire towards without prior disruption.

Whilst recognising considerable barriers, others pointed to the theory and practice of transformative education and learning, and to innovative educational projects – some within the mainstream - which are exemplars of systemic change and beacons of possibility. Key points included:

- Education put in role of supporting exploitive capitalism, learners reduced to human capital and consumer role (Vasavi, Juego)
- Failure of education to prepare people for existential challenges (many)
- Culpability of education in contributing to current crises (Lautensach)
- Paradigm blindness; need to transcend dominant assumptions and perceptions (Singh, Lupinacci, Yogananthan)
- Intransigence of educational systems (Wals)
- The reality of epistemicide and the need for multiple ways of knowing (Hall, Kesson, Singh)
- The bending of 'social responsibility' towards the corporate and state agenda, and the role of university autonomy as a necessary defence (Patomäki)
- The damage of commodification and homogenisation (Standing, Takayanagui)
- Need for unlearning (Tandon)
- Student-centered learning (ontological individualism) contrary to need for collective learning (Silova, Komatsu, and Rappleye)
- Value of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in catalysing some response in higher education to global issues, but the danger of not recognising the 'growth-ist'/instrumentialist paradigm embedded within them - and within sustainable development rhetoric (Bedford, Juego)

3. **Vision and grounding**

There was a rich discussion on alternatives that would (or already) manifest more humanistic, life-affirming, relational, integrative, ecological and holistic forms of education and learning in the service of securing survival, and beyond that, the possibility of wellbeing for humanity and the natural world.

- Need to articulate and realise the ecological paradigm/worldview (Woolpert)
- Critical role of social movements as a powerful pathway to realising eco and social justice (Karlberg, Karp, Poland)
- Need for emancipatory pedagogy (Liodakis)
- Need for deep listening and to liberate our collective imagination (Singh)
- Importance of meaning for young people, emotional and spiritual intelligence and literacy (Rimanoczy, Dahl, Tucker)
- Need for Big History (Christian, Dauncey, Tucker)
- The primacy of life (Tandon)
- 'Thriveability' (rather than sustainability) (Baue)

- 'Just sustainability' – putting justice as the marker for educational and other policies/activities (Juego)

4. Strategy and design

Here commentary and description ranged from inspiring exemplars that might be emulated, to ideas and proposals for shifting thinking or seeding projects and initiatives. Many contributors very helpfully provided links, websites and references for further information and exploration.

A strong recurring theme was re-making, re-imagining and reclaiming education and learning – in order to affirm, honour and regenerate communities, nature, and our humanity in their diversity wherever possible. And have faith in our ability to do so.

- Trust teachers and learners **(**Cámara, Dauncey)
- Use digital tools to re-think education (Vandeweerd)
- Use C-MOOC technologies (Gismondi)
- Critical life skills (Khayesi)
- Transformative learning (Fischer, Bedford)
- Transgressive learning and building disruptive capacity (Wals)
- Community Based Participatory Research, integrated learning centres, and social movement learning (Hall, Karlberg, Vasavi, Wals)
- Generation of integral and localised knowledge in community (Duhart, Bedford)
- Muddling as methodology, buoyed by student demand (Hendlin)
- Teaching for economic pluralism (Leveson-Gower, Nieuwenhuis)
- Regenerative practices with young people outside academia (Snick)
- Meditative practices (Jing Lin)
- Design courses and transition at CMU (Irwin)
- U of Toronto Sustainability Pathways transdisciplinarity program (Robinson)
- Interdisciplinarity (World Education for Tomorrow) (Saey)
- The Fifth Element (T5E) – catalysing self-organised learning (Alvarez-Pereira)
- Developing eco-literacy goals with students as key actors (Fortun)
- Give young people and the supressed hope and inspiration, and learn from them (Horn, Weiskel, Jing Lin, Snick)
- Life-long learning (Dauncey, and many others)
- Multi-university cities learning towards collective intelligence (Ravetz)
- Pluriverse of climate justice universities (Foran)
- The Civic Intelligence Research and Action Lab (CIRAL) as exemplar (Schuler)
- Human scale ecologically based learning centres (Orr)
- Work with faith communities (Dahl)
- Educate people as a gift to life through Great Transition courses (Stokes)

As I wrote in my opening essay, all education at this juncture of our – and our planetary - history, needs rapidly to become commensurate with, and appropriate to, the challenge of securing the threatened future. This realisation is now 'in the air', but with it too, are signs of resistance to the kinds of change required.

Encouragingly however, this deep and fertile GTI discussion has evidenced that our critique is robust, our argument is powerful, and our proposals are necessary, practicable and often already proven. There is a considerable collective intelligence here which invites wide and urgent engagement.

Whilst I share Eva Swidler's cautionary note that we must always ensure critical self-reflection, I am buoyed by Richard Falk's view, that, "struggles for the 'cultural mind' are underway, and the good news is that winds of change are blowing in directions congenial with the GTI imaginary".

Stephen Sterling

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Dr Stephen Sterling
Emeritus Professor of Sustainability Education
University of Plymouth
United Kingdom

Email: stephen.sterling@plymouth.ac.uk

Website: **'Re-thinking education for a more sustainable world'**
https://www.sustainableeducation.co.uk/