

Book review

Postformal Education: A Philosophy for Complex Futures

Jennifer M. Gidley
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First, a classic educational game: some word association. This is a method that is used to limber up thinking in many a creativity or futures workshop.

Education?

Maybe some usual topics come to mind?

Numeracy, literacy and science standards?

The annual Program for International Student Assessment scores?

Possibly, the limitations of the industrial model of classroom education?

The future of education?

Learning with technology?

How best to connect with the interests and choices of millennials and the generations to come?

Social mobility: the engagement of working class boys?

Development: the involvement of girls?

Futures in education?

Competing visions of what could and should be?

Back to steiner?

Or strict standards to secure the focus of children from chaotic homes?

In many broad brush or sector-specific future studies, the

topic of education is touched up a little, if at all. Then, the “software” of the learning processes tends to play second fiddle to the “hardware” of tech and demographics. Probably because of the sorts of people who gravitate to future work, the underpinning academic model and learning paradigm are rarely questioned.

Equally, and in contrast, I am hugely impressed with the vision and aspiration of the educators I meet, and parents are often aspiring to do something different. A conservationist was telling me last week how he is home schooling his kids so they can learn more completely – guided by curiosity.

To those “in the system”, the case for change in education is compelling:

- from the viral rap “I just sued the school system”;
- through the little-known 1990 book from Peter Senge and team “Schools That Learn”; and
- to the much-watched online talks of Sir Ken Robinson.

The vision of what could emerge is seen in pockets, everywhere:

- the UK state school that teaches kids from a deprived state of outdoor skills, such as trapping and skinning animals, much to the relish of the regulator office for standards in education, children’s services and skills (OFSTED); and
- the online inventors of new courses in India and USA.

Into this space, we have this book offering *A Philosophy for Complex*

Futures. It explores the future of education pedagogy.

Jennifer Gidley has produced a work that repays studying. It is not destined to be an airport best seller with quickly digested pithy stories. Rather, it sows seeds. There is much here to repay contemplation.

When coming to the book, I assumed “postformal” meant looking to the period beyond statutory or tertiary education. However, for Dr Gidley, it is an invite to think about what comes after the still-dominant model based on the factory or warehouse. It is a book to stir up our thinking and the education system.

In my work across all sorts of systems from textile supply chains to protecting biodiversity, I find that four things are needed for sustained and significant improvement, namely, curiosity, holistic thinking, honest dialogue and hope. Gidley’s work requires a pull, a demand – the seeking of insight. For those who get to this point, it offers a wider view, a challenge and encouragement too.

I have enjoyed getting into the book. Not knowing the wider literature, it was eye opening – and far more use than a few blogs or the occasional vlog.

It is unselfconsciously “about radical change”. It takes a grand historical sweep. For example, Dr Gidley chronicles how Aztec culture was the first known one with mandatory education and how mass formal schooling has only been around for a couple of centuries.

An early online review criticized the literature review element to the early book, with its review of psychology

and other traditions, for example. However, I think that this wide and informed perspective is a strength. Jennifer Gidley works up to a comprehensive framework in the form of a wheel based around love, live, wisdom and voice (that we meet on p. 179). This model resonates to the contemporary work of organization improvement more generally.

In contrast, London has seen its education performance transformed over the past decade or so through what initially might seem like a different route. Waste of talent is a design flaw to be addressed by applying lots of “best practices” at the same time. This has often been with strict adherence to uniform and timetable rules. This trend is not explored in the book. Maybe, that would be called a “New Formal Education” – but it would share the same passion for creating the best learning contexts.

The book challenges the dominant pedagogy: the one that has served the elite of our elite institutions, even if not their children. This may be why it seems that many involved in future studies are not all that interested in education, especially the wider themes and theories underpinning it. If you are traditionally bright and self-motivated, then thinking from the edge of education may not resonate.

However, in education, I think that the book will find a receptive audience. For example, after the recent scores from the OECD PISA were published in December 2016, a principal of a middle-ranking faith-based school in a middle-ranking country emailed

me: “I think the move to therefore use this to justify a further focus on literacy and numeracy isn’t going to help matters because of the ways of thinking required in these areas. The only country doing what Australia is now proposing (i.e. a greater focus on literacy and numeracy) that has success in changing their international rankings in PISA, TIMSS etc is China, where that is nearly all that they do. The other countries that are showing significant improvements are focusing more on creative and critical thinking skills. In Australia, there needs to be a shift towards raising the level to higher quality intelligent debate on issues rather than popular short term politics”.

I am sure Gidley would say “Amen” to that.

Phil Hadridge struggled at school. However, he ended up studying for a first degree Social and Political Sciences at University of Cambridge in his late 20s before a career in the UK civil service. *Futures*, especially scenario planning and behavioral simulation, were part of his springboard into organization consultancy in the mid noughties. As a trustee, he is on the board of a hospital school in the UK and oversees education schemes in Malawi. He consults educators in the school and higher education sectors alongside significant support to fashion, conservation and health.

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