

Futures in the Classroom – Students’ Viewpoints

by Sabina Head

Abstract

This paper is based on two student surveys taken before and after six months of futures work in a Study of Society and Environment course for 13 year old students (five lessons per week). It aims to discover students’ perceptions on the validity of Futures work in school. At St Margaret’s Anglican Girls’ School, (Brisbane, Australia) where the surveys were carried out, the SOSE course was introduced in 1997, replacing Year 8 History and Geography (three lessons per week each). The paper was written with the support of the Principal, Mrs Vicki Waters.

Futures Studies Work Undertaken By Students

1. In Semester One, during an introductory unit called “You, Your Society, and the Environment”, timelines were introduced, and the 200 year present was given as the structure of a personal timeline for the students. They also completed a worksheet on short and long term possible consequences of decision making, hypothetical and real.
2. No specific Futures work was done in the second unit, “Mapping”, although the first Futures survey was undertaken at this time. Students as individuals were asked to write down their predictions, hopes, fears, and possible personal influence on their own lives, their local area, and the world by 2020. The results are in table form on pages 8 and 9.
3. The third “Local Area” unit integrated Futures topics in that students completed a land use survey on the local area around St Margaret’s, including two historic colonial houses and a Chinese Temple, a busy main road, a creek and a residential area. They then wrote a report that included their plan for redeveloping the area by 2020. This was to include a map. They were asked to list what they had learnt from creating the plan. Some examples are provided here:
 - “I got to know the area very well.”
 - “You don’t really know what people want so you have to survey.”
 - “What I want isn’t necessarily what the area needs.”
 - “When you plan an area you have to respect the residents.”
 - “No matter what you do, there will always be people who complain. You can never satisfy everyone, no matter how hard you try.”
4. Futures work in the fourth “Stone Ages” unit consisted of a worksheet based on group discussion of the effects of hypothetical change and the pace of change, as well as personal reactions to change itself. The girls were asked to consider alternative futures if Aboriginals had become farmers and herders, and if a new Ice Age came to Southern Australia within several different time frames. They were asked to discuss and record their reactions to big changes in their own lives, local area, and world conditions, with or without their prior knowledge.
5. Having completed the activities (these form the body of this report), the students were asked to make their recommendations about the value of Futures work in SOSE. Some have been quoted verbatim as I felt that their opinions and responses were of great potential value. It is particularly interesting to note that, despite the fact that the same percentage of students felt worse after working in Futures, as those who felt better (Q3), 87% of all students felt that Futures should be a part of the SOSE course (Q5). Their suggestions as to their preferred attitudes towards the future are inspiring (Q13).

Futures Recommendations - 107 Responses
(made after Futures work was undertaken)

1. In SOSE you have completed some Futures exercises - have they changed the way you think about the future? **Yes** 63.0%
No..... 37.0%

(The percentages in this question have been accurately recorded but are of dubious value given later responses.)

2. In what way have your thoughts changed?

Sample Responses:

- “Instead of thinking about my personal future only, I now think of the world’s future (eg transport, computers, the environment, etc).”
- “I now have what I think to be a more realistic view of the future. About the good things and the bad.”
- “It made my mind more open when we did the section “Decisions have Consequences”.”
- “I have a more open eye to different cultures.”
- “The environment we live in may not be what I thought.”

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3. Do you think that increasing your understanding of the future makes you feel better or worse about it? **Better** 39.0%
Worse 39.0%
Both 14.0%
Neither/Confused 6.5%

4. What exercises were especially strong in making you feel this way? **Local Area** 26.0%
Survey 21.0%
Timeline 11.0%

Sample Responses:

- “The SOSE field report and having to think of changes I drew a future map which helped a lot. You could then see the differences. *(better)*”
- “The exercise “You, Your Society and the Environment” and “Your Local Area” were the ones especially which made me feel this way. *(better)* It was amazing to find out that what we do affects the environment dramatically.”
- “The first topic “You, Your Society and the Environment” and “The Stone Ages” because you see how much the world’s already changed! *(worse)*”

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5.	Should Futures be a part of the SOSE course?	Yes 87.0%
		No 11.0%

“No” Sample Responses:

- “No because it could really worry some people.”
- “No, I don’t really think so. If it has to be put in at all make it a smaller section. Futures only makes me think about bad things.”

6. If “yes”, in what way should it be included?

“Yes” Sample Responses:

- “Yes, to tell people to look forward to the future and not to feel it will be completely different, because people will always be people.”
- “Yes, it should tell the students or give them an understanding of the current day’s situation (eg the wars in Ireland and places like that, the pollution problems) and more importantly how to prevent or help these things.”
- “Yes, I think sharing our point of views about the future is a good idea. We should be let known what will happen if we keep treating the world badly.”

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7.	In SOSE, what other skills should students learn to do?	Environmental 16.0%
		Current Skills OK 14.0%
		Mapping 13.0%
		Other 11.0%
		Discussions 5.0%

Sample Responses:

- “About caring for other people and also about the structure of Australian government.”
- “**Think and listen.** Most of the students don’t really do either of these (in any classes). I think people should have debates and this way they will be able to see what everyone thinks, and broaden their views.”
- “Caring for environment” skills. “Future management” skills. Good possibilities and bad possibilities of the future so we are aware of them.”
- “Students should be able to name all of the countries around the world, so they can spot them on a world globe.”

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8.	In SOSE, what other things should students know about?	International Current Affairs .. 23.0%
		International History 13.0%
		Australian History 11.0%
		Environment 10.0%
		Wars 9.0%
		Current Content OK 8.0%
		General Knowledge 8.0%

Sample Responses:

- “Students should know about countries that are less fortunate than we are and do an essay on it.”
- “More about international and overseas affairs so we have more of an idea about where Queensland/Australia is in the scheme of things.”
- “Well, seeing we are doing futures, I think students should study history, and how people lived, and try to see which communities worked best.”
- “The consequences we face with pollution in the long term, rather than short.”
- “Students should know how to write letters of complaint etc so that they might be able to stop any changes going on in their area that aren’t in the community’s best interest or changes that could damage the environment.”

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9. Learning to read, write, and handle numbers is important for all people to know about. Should everybody learn Futures at school?	Yes	75.0%
	No	13.0%
	Optional	6.0%
	Maybe	4.0%
	Other	4.0%

“Yes” Sample Responses:

- “Yes, because it might make people more aware of the present.”
- “Yes, it will help them take their place in society.”

10. How should they learn it?	Field Trips	12.0%
	Discussion/Debate	12.0%
	Books	12.0%
	As Now	10.0%
	Videos	7.0%

All these are “Yes” responses from Question 9.

- “Know what happens in the world first, not **only** know what happens in Australia.”
- “It could be combined somehow into science. (eg What scientific effects could change the world in 50 years’ time?)”
- “Working in groups, sharing ideas and then working together to do an assignment, focusing on their ideas.”
- “Lots of different people should show how they did at school and what they became in the future.”
- “They should learn it by doing some research about the past and see how much has changed in certain years and try to compare it for the future.”

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11. What is the most important thing everyone should learn to do to help them prepare for and create the future?	Care for the Environment	28.0%
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Sample Responses:

- “They should learn how to help today to help the future.”
- “How to understand people.”
- “About what will happen if you do something to our world (eg ozone layer, forests, etc).”
- “By understanding history and why things happened and how.”
- “To cooperate and think things over carefully.”
- “Take some time to think about what they want to be in the future and then look at what they’re doing and see if what they are doing helps them.”
- “The most important thing is not only to state problems but give answers as well. I also think students should be heard.”

12. How should they learn to do it?

Sample Responses to Questions 11 and 12:

- “Have a very open imagination, I love thinking about the future, planning very high tech things (Q12) to think up the unbelievable, wish for something exquisite and try to make it something believable for the future.”
- “People should learn to care for the environment more and try to “bond” better with other countries (races). (Q12) Advertising and worldwide companies could be set up to help the environment and get people more involved. Respect and understanding is all people have to do to reconcile.”
- “Learn how to change school work questions into real life situations. (Q12) Change some of the text to suit Question 11 (previous question). Or one day a week have time set aside for different things.”
- “Conversation and the ability to think ahead (Q12) by the mistakes other people have made in the past.”
- “Teamwork, listening to ideas, learning creative thinking, cooperation; but also working independently, so you don’t depend on other people (Q12) by working in groups a lot of the time and by yourself, too.”
- “To learn how to care for the earth and environment. (Q12) By physical activities, where we would actually go out and **do** something about it.”

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13. What do you think is the best **attitude** towards the future? **Positive** 50.0%
Open/Accepting/Ready 14.0%

14. How should this attitude be promoted and encouraged?

Sample Responses to Questions 13 and 14:

- “To try to live in harmony with nature. (Q14) It should be taught to kids from a very young age, all through school. Bigger fines for litter, pollution, cutting down trees, poaching, etc.”
- “Positive thinking/action taken towards the matter of pollution/ozone layer and looking after our environment so it can get better for the future. (Q14) By protesting and TV ads, school projects, class discussions and class videos, and also teaching young kids how to be environmentally friendly so they grow up that way.”
- “Appreciate other countries’ religion, culture, language and work hard (Q14) by including it in lessons.”
- “A positive one! Knowing that what you do and think will make a difference. (Q14) By getting students involved in every discussion so they think their opinion is worthwhile.”
- “A positive one, so people focus on the good things, not the negative ones. (Q14) Teachers could tell students only a few negative aspects of the future but many positive predictions. Then, people will not worry so much and can face problems when the time comes.”
- “An open mind. No one knows for sure what will happen and we have to go into it with an open mind and a changeable attitude. (Q14) Teachers need to nurture and encourage this attitude. You can’t change the future if you’re not willing to see it. It is those with an open mind who can better the future.”
- “A positive, friendly and good hearted attitude, because we must hold on to one of our most important and sole quality that machines don’t have, and that is **feeling!** (Q14) Advertising campaigns, using stars and celebrities to make people feel that they will have the same qualities and privileges as the stars promoting this.”

Conclusions

The essence of Futures work with these students seems to hinge on creating and nurturing an enduring relationship between the students and their surroundings (global and local), so that their future is known and felt, on as many levels as possible, to be inextricably linked with that of their world. From their responses, this relationship would currently appear to be tenuous and starved of sufficient linkage to have much validity for them. Thus they see their future as separate from that of their surroundings, both physical and societal. They see themselves as discrete individuals who, rather than interacting as contributing and aware members of a global and local community, are merely pawns to be carried along towards whatever future someone else is responsible for.

These, therefore, seem to be basic issues in terms of student needs that could be addressed in a SOSE classroom.

1. The need to make conscious and constant connections between the students and the global picture, and to a lesser extent the local picture, by the use of strategies that directly involve the students so that they can engage with the issues. This would help to build the students' perception that they have a place in the scheme of things. The following points elaborate on this.
2. The need to be better informed in terms of current affairs and the placement of these on global, national and local maps. The wealth of information available is not necessarily consciously accessed by the students and may overwhelm to the point of apathy, without guidance and some simplification for the age level. Their relationship with the world is based on knowledge of the world.
3. The need for "positive" information as well as "negative" information. Apparently negative events and issues can be examined in terms of both basic attitudes. ("Positive" for whom? "Negative" for whom?) Students can be made aware that there is often a choice.
4. The need for more knowledge about the various methods of taking action that are open to them, whether it be pastoral, environmental or political. This will help to create a feeling of empowerment.
4. The need to know that their opinions are valued. Surveys of student responses help them to clarify their own thoughts, and personal reflection after a topic has been concluded serves to reinforce the connection between student and issue. However, they also need feedback from surveys to reinforce the sense of self-worth and a feeling of community with the other students.
6. The need to engage with environmental issues at local and global levels. Many students see this as a priority in its own right.

Practical Considerations

At the time of their recommendations, students had completed only half the Year 8 SOSE course, and the responses will correspond with this. Their reflections would expose any gaps in conceptual development by the end of the full year of course delivery.

Structurally, the SOSE course is tentative in nature, and open to developments as teachers become more familiar with the concepts in the perspectives (of which Futures is one) outlined in the National Curriculum Statement. This, however, is easier said than done; and an in-depth approach to the complexities and implications of Futures work in SOSE or any other Key Learning Area takes time and effort. Teachers with experience in single-subject disciplines may find it difficult to adjust not only to a six-strand Key Learning Area, but nine different curriculum perspectives within SOSE as well. The implications for in-service needs are obvious.

Most of the Futures exercises were “add-ons” to the content. Full integration in the actual design of units could build student engagement with topics. They could place themselves in roles as historical figures, and be involved with their problems. They could reflect on the unit when it is completed, and their opinions treated as important by receiving feedback from teachers, perhaps leading to discussion.

Futures need not necessarily generate extra course content; rather, a shift in viewpoint and unit planning could integrate Futures thinking into the whole context of the work undertaken, while students still practise essential skills and processes within that context.

Future Directions

In compiling this work I have learned that the students themselves, far from being uncaring adolescents, hunger for a sense of community and purpose to which they can attach themselves in various ways, so that they can make a worthwhile contribution according to their individual skills and interests.

The challenge for the future is to prepare the circumstances in which the students can explore and build this sense of community, so that they are supported in their preferred attitudes towards the future - positive, open, accepting and ready for anything.

Initial Survey - 88 Responses
(taken before Futures work was begun)

Multiple answers were acceptable. Thus the percentages may total over 100%. Very low percentages were deleted due to lack of space.

Predictions

Personal		Local Area		Global	
<i>I will:</i>		<i>There will be:</i>		<i>There will be:</i>	
have employment	49%	more buildings (shops, houses, etc)	80%	advances in technology	33%
have a family	34%	population growth	19%	more pollution	23%
be married	32%	new types of transport	18%	more conflict	19%
be educated	16%	environmental degradation	13%	more population	15%
own a home	11%	more industry and commerce	11%	more computers	9%
have travelled	10%	more pollution	8%	a new transport system	7%
		more roads	7%	more transport	6%
		more cars	7%	forests destroyed	6%
				world peace	6%

Hopes

Personal		Local Area		Global	
<i>I will:</i>		<i>There will be:</i>		<i>There will be:</i>	
have employment	53%	preserved and improved parks, trees, the bush	30%	world peace	56%
have a family	24%	clean environs	17%	a cleaner world	36%
be married	22%	more shops	13%	improved world health	19%
own a house	17%	amenities	7%	no starvation/poverty	15%
have travelled	11%			a drop in crime	10%
have money	10%			technology advances	8%
be happy	10%			stable/lower population	5%
have a car	6%			forests kept	5%
be healthy	5%			full employment	5%
have healthy relatives	5%				

Fears

Personal	Local Area	Global
<i>I will have faced:</i>		
death (self or relatives)..... 64%	<i>There will be:</i>	
unemployment..... 19%	an increase in population..... 33%	war..... 57%
illness 9%	a decrease in natural environment..... 15%	pollution 28%
failure (study or work) 8%	an increase in crime/violence 15%	over population 11%
lack of finances 6%	an increase in roads/traffic 11%	an increase in crime..... 10%
family breakup 5%	more built up areas 10%	the end of the world 9%
	a wasteland/a mess 9%	deforestation..... 7%
	houses turned to apartments..... 9%	resource depletion 6%
	an increase in commerce and industry 9%	disease outbreak 5%
		starvation..... 5%

Personal Influence of the Future - What I Can Do

Personal	Local Area	Global
<i>I can:</i>		
have studied..... 45%	<i>I can:</i>	
have employment 14%	take environmental action 51%	blank/little/nothing 32%
general strategies/attitude..... 25%	take political action 23%	take environmental action 20%
specific actions (variety) 19%	blank/nothing/don't know 9%	take personal action/charity 18%
work hard 9%		take political action 17%

Reference: Hicks, D. and Holden, C. (1995) Visions of the Future. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

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