ICED 2020 proceedings:

The future(s)-ready graduate: Whose future? Which graduate?

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Abstract

In what would have been the closing keynote of the ICED 2020 conference, I would have asked us all to critically reflect on the conference theme "The Future-Ready Graduate" to acknowledge the need to be "future-ready" in higher education, and to take the future seriously in light of impending challenges such as climate change, sustainability goals, access and success, inequality, and so on. I would have reminded us to take our gleanings from the conference to shape our pedagogy, curricula and assessment practices in our own contexts. All this because the emergence of the future-ready graduate depends on how we as educators, academics, academic developers and other stakeholders are prepared to engage with a future that envisages a life that goes beyond conventions and traditions into multimodal careers and alternative workplaces – but also a life beyond injustice and depravation so that people can become self-reliant and self-determined. Time and place are always important, I would have said! New future contexts are dependent on who we are in our current contexts, so we need to look at these critically to decide how to work towards a future that is sustainable and beneficial for us all.

1   Introduction

In writing this piece, I am inclined to pose the same meditations and provocations, albeit through a different lens: COVID-19. What does "future-ready" mean now? How do we proceed in the face of such grave disruptions to teaching and learning? Despite our intense engagement to date with pedagogical theories, concepts, frameworks, taxonomies, approaches and philosophies, we may argue that nothing has prepared us adequately for the complexity of this unprecedented crisis. So how *do* we learn from a future that is emerging right now before us, in the present?

The "future-ready graduate" theme is perhaps more relevant now than a year ago, when it was first conceptualised. Then, even the not-so-distant-future of ICED 2020 seemed like a very long time away because the word "future" has incredible power to project itself as time still to come, removed from the present and as something to deal with later. This meaning is bolstered by literature and movie genres that tend to represent the future as dystopian, Armageddon-esque, sci-fi and fantastical. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, is very real and by bringing the whole world to a standstill in 2020, has disrupted our sense of the future, in fact of time itself, by catapulting us into an unknown, unprepared-for reality, thrust upon us

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from nowhere. We learnt quickly that the future is not *out there* in a distant time capsule but that it is *in here,* always entangled in our present and past and must be part of how we envisage our educational work going forward. To be future-ready is to be able to work with time in this iterative way and to be ready to respond to any or all contingencies thrown at us. What it means to be "future-ready" now, whether as a graduate or academic, provides us with an opportunity to reconceptualise the past, integrate with our present realities and conceive of future possibilities across our contexts, and to recognise how these temporalities work in never-ending, interrelated cycles through time.

2   *Opportunities*

The crisis has afforded us an immense opportunity to think creatively, innovatively, sustainably, collaboratively but above all, urgently, about teaching, learning, assessing, evaluating, facilitating and engaging differently. Educators and students have embraced the steep learning curve wholeheartedly and new ways of thinking, being and doing, under extreme conditions of social distancing, lockdown and shelter have emerged as examples of resilience and agency in online classrooms. Such are the dispositions and attitudes needed for future readiness, we may argue.

The pandemic also brought into stark relief the unequal playing fields in higher education as the pivot to online education brought to the surface the huge fissures between privilege and pain, with those students unable to access data and connectivity being left behind in the onboarding agenda. For many educators, this has sharpened our gaze and practice, making it incumbent on us to embrace a socially aware approach to teaching and learning in the "new normal" of remote and distance education. The crisis also offers us a unique opportunity to understand the digital in/exclusion and the spectre of digital datafication which must be brought into the conversation as we think anew and afresh about our traditional practices in light of current demands. We need to use our critical awareness and praxis as a catalyst for a community-oriented relational future, based on humanitarian eco-systems rather than individualistic ego-systems (Scharmer, 2018).

3   *Future(s)*

The pandemic has disrupted our stability in ways that might make it important to think of the future in the plural. Conceptualising not one but many futures requires us to be open to the idea of different variations and directions that may unfold over the next few years (Selwyn et al., 2020). Preparing the "future*s*-ready graduate" should compel higher education to consider different future realities for graduates, each linked to the specific social, economic, political, environmental, technological and legal nuances in different domains rather than future oriented conceptions that totalise and obscure specificities. One-size-fits-all innovations and solutions tend to blur the unequal playing fields, discrepancies and gaps in the material realities that COVID-19 has caused to re-surface. To assume that everyone can make the leap into the same future at the same time is to negate the identity, agency and context of those not equitably equipped to envisage a 4IR or AI reality together or at all, especially when poverty, hunger, housing, shelter and education are the harsh realities and crises that people have to manage daily. It is difficult to envisage a future together when there are glaring disparities in our realities that make it nearly impossible for individuals to self-actualise in commensurate ways. The future might not be one common reality for all but a multiplicity of creative options that speak to different material realities in the global North and South. The "futures-ready graduate" must be able to work with diversity across our global contexts in ways that enable thinking about the future as responsible agents for change and justice going forward.

4   Futures Thinking

"Futures Thinking", an emergent discourse and scholarship in higher education, encourages us to innovate, redesign and modernise in tandem with the technological future of work, which is becoming more adaptable, flexible and agile by expanding our repertoire to include robotics and artificial intelligence in various industries. While the world of work, industry, research and other stakeholders are propelling us into a new age of 4IR and in a sense defining the future for us, we need to understand for ourselves what the future means, from our own geographies and biographies. When educational policy makers turn the focus on access, skills and employability, we might be duped into thinking we are actually creating future pathways by "dealing with" inequality, but the "negative externalities" (Lewis, 2020) or side effects of the Third Industrial Revolution show that pollution, global warming and climate change, deforestation, species extinction and massive and growing global inequality are manifest. How do these impact on the revolution we now want to champion, and who picks up the collateral damage as each epoch dreams up its next revolution? Who picks up the global tab on inequality?

5   Meditation and mediation

Who we are and from where we speak (Moyo, 2011) are important markers of enunciation that cannot be homogenised, universalised, essentialised or reduced in any consideration of future-readiness. We have to work with it all, the good, the bad and the ugly, if we want to create ambient conditions for an emerging future that is ethical, just and accountable. This evokes questions such as whose futures are served by current innovations and interventions and who gets to decide on what the future should be, what the world should look like, and who should be playing a key role in shaping such a future. Whose futures are we talking about anyway, and what future are we "ready-ing" our students for? Does being prepared include respect for humanity, sustainability, inclusion, social justice, citizenship, reflection, interdisciplinarity, and so on? These are key considerations that universities must engage with to educate the futures-ready graduate in relation to economic, cultural and social realities.

The present crisis thus provides us with important meditation and mediation moments to think about the future in innovative and socially inclusive ways. The irony is not lost on us when Gordon (2020) points out that COVID-19, which is predominantly a respiratory dis-ease, mirrors the dis-ease experienced by the #BlackLivesMatter movement and millions the world over who also say "I can't breathe." What does the future look like from this perspective where social injustice suffocates and maims? What will bring equivalence to make the future available to and viable for all, not as a commodity to be bartered and traded but as a living value that we all can work with integrity towards, in healthy and equitable ways? Teaching and learning have a critical role to play in disrupting the compliance, reproduction and stasis in our universities, but this needs to be done with urgency. As Selwyn et al. (2020) argue, the 2020s is the time "to better theorise the links between developments in technology, inequality and education, while also striving to actively design technologies that facilitate more equitable futures for all" (page 2). While we need to be open to different responses to becoming "futures-ready", how do we prepare students for a changing world if we as academics, teachers and researchers have little propensity and motivation for change ourselves? The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire reminds us that "our action in the world is largely determined by the way we see ourselves within it, and that a correct perception necessitates an ongoing reflection and critical consciousness, only achieved through praxis: action and reflection in order to transform it" (1990, 66).

6   Conclusion

The future need not be paralysing, but a productive catalyst for creative and innovative answers to our current complexities. The future need not be a runaway object over which we

have no control, if it is framed to take all needs and contexts into account. Our multiple perspectives, voices and collective agency are important to envision a pluri-versal reality in which we enjoy the benefits of a strong community but also stretch each other to think outside the proverbial box. We have a huge opportunity to create the conditions for collective sharing, co-creation of knowledge and collaboration instead of being individualistic, separatist and competitive. By reflecting on critical aspects such as how the university community deals with knowledge, whether students are consumers or producers of knowledge, the importance of the curriculum for the future, the methodologies that will help to prepare our graduates well and so on, we can imagine the future together and prepare ourselves for change.

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