Q & A with Keri Facer

Since 2007, Professor Keri Facer has directed research for Beyond Current Horizons, a multi-disciplinary strategic project designed to build the capacity of UK education to understand and respond to developments in science, technology and society over the next 20 years. In June 2009, she launched a set of practical tools aimed at supporting strategic educational decision-making.

You were the director of research at Futurelab for six years. What are the highlights of that time for you?

There are so many, it’s hard to choose. From a purely creative perspective, and thinking about the work that was really first of its kind, the mixed reality learning projects were probably the most exciting. We started with the Savannah Project – which involved overlaying a virtual savannah onto a school playing field, and challenging children to hunt and act like lions. It was a mix of computer gaming, research, Cowboys and Indians, and a lot of really complex technical development by Hewlett Packard, the University of Nottingham, and the BBC.

Now, we have a toolkit called Create A Scape, which anyone – children, teachers and parents – can use to create virtual worlds to overlay physical space. We have teachers transforming school fields into the surface of the moon, for example. To create a mediascape, you start with a digital map of your local area. You can attach digital sounds, pictures and video to places that you choose on the map. All you need is a PDA and a pair of headphones. An optional GPS unit can automatically trigger the images, video and sounds in the right places, and by going outside into the area the map covers, you experience the mediascape: that is, you hear the sounds and see the pictures and video in the places that the creator has put them.

You seem to put a lot of importance on outdoor activities. Why is that?

Too often, digital technologies are used to compensate for the fact that children over the last hundred years have increasingly been stopped from accessing and playing in public spaces – due to that other great 20th-century technology, the car. I’m interested in how we can use digital technologies to enable young people to have more freedom to occupy and play a role in public space, and to reconnect educational institutions with their communities.
What value do schools have, and what role do teachers play in your scenarios?

The next 20 years are likely to be characterised by a massive diversification in the sites of learning. Already, over the last two decades, we have seen that people no longer need to go to schools to access information, or to meet teachers. Over the coming years, I’d expect to see an increasing interest in informal learning, intergenerational learning, and learning in the workplace. Learning will no longer be synonymous with ‘schooling’. Instead, the challenge is to explore what the role of formal education is, what the role of face-to-face learning is, what the value of schools is likely to be in this more complex environment.

This doesn’t mean that I’m in favour of deschooling – arguably, schools are the only means we have of really tackling inequalities. But we do need to rethink the role of the teacher. It’s not just about them becoming facilitators – it’s about developing a new cohort of teachers who are really able to create bridges between children’s diverse learning environments, supporting them to navigate and reflect upon learning in these different sites. This means that we need to get away from the recent obsession with pedagogy and start to have a major debate about curriculum again – something the UK has not really had since the arrival of the National Curriculum. We need to equip educators, again, to engage in curriculum design and to ask the big questions, with students, about what we need to learn for the coming century.

What is exercising your mind at the moment?

Currently I’m thinking about intergenerational relationships. By 2030, 50 per cent of the population of Western Europe is forecast to be over 50 years of age. We will have huge questions about allocating resources, how to enable people to keep learning longer, and how people of different ages and generations work together. This will be harder than we think. We will need to bring together the strengths of different generations.

The changing demographic make-up of the population, combined with the serious likelihood of potential climate warming, present major challenges to the education system – challenges that require us to fundamentally question some of our basic assumptions about education: what is it for, who teaches, where does it happen?

If we are to ensure that education plays a positive role in our societies over the coming years, we need to begin to address some of these issues and to start empowering educators to develop a new culture of research and innovation in their communities. There will not be one right answer to the question ‘What is the school of the future?’ Instead, we need a diverse ecology of educational practice to help us prepare for the multiple possible futures this century might bring.

This interview was conducted by the Research Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.


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