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The problem of the future and the possibilities of the present in education research

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ABSTRACT

Educators today are increasingly asked to transform education to meet the economic needs of the future. Progressive education research has long sought to contest such instrumental accounts of the future in education. The paper argues that this research, however, often shows limited critical reflexivity in its own assumptions about the future and offers educators limited support in responding to proliferating contemporary discourses of radical uncertainty. The paper draws on the work of [Massumi \(2007\)](#), [Riel Miller \(2011\)](#) and [Adam and Groves \(2007\)](#) to argue that if, instrumental education futures are to be resisted, researchers should develop methods that make visible the creative possibilities of the present and the powerful role of mutuality and reciprocity in guaranteeing better futures.

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1. Introduction

The lights dim in the conference hall, and the silvered image of a humanoid robot appears on the screen, the music starts and the slides begin to change. ‘Shift Happens’, announces the title slide of the presentation before page after page of statistics and images scroll by; images designed to persuade the audience of teachers, policy makers and academics that the world is changing, that the future will be different and that education needs to ‘adapt to the 21st century’.

All across the world, audiences of teachers and policy makers are watching what has become known as the ‘Shift Happens’ slideshow (“[Shift Happens](#),” 2007) soaking up its 60-odd slides of statistics that tell a tale of the decline of the West, the rise of China, the seemingly relentless development of digital technologies. First created by a schoolteacher in the US, the slides were refined and promoted by Microsoft. It has since become a hugely popular resource; YouTube report over 5.5 million downloads of the original and over 4.8 million downloads of the second version. It has been shown around the world in classrooms, as part of teacher training and professional development and in the conference halls of the growing transnational education industry.

This slideshow is just one of the many tools being used by policymakers, activists, advisors, and salesman arguing that education must change to meet the demands of ‘the future’. Politicians and businessmen paint pictures of international global competition; environmentalists describe futures of climate catastrophe (“[We are the people](#),” 2007); scientists and engineers make the case for rapidly approaching technological disruption (“[Learning without frontiers](#),” 2012). What these groups have in common is the argument that educators should insert calculations about ‘the future’ into decision-making about education today.

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And yet, the assumptions that underpin such claims once they enter the education arena are frequently unexamined. Gough's analysis of policy and curriculum documents, for example, demonstrates how the future becomes visible in education discourse primarily through 'tacit inferences [...] token invocations [or] taken for granted assumptions' (Gough, 1990). Indeed, he continues:

even when concepts of futures are consciously invoked they seem rarely to be problematized or subjected to critical reflection. Rather, they seem to occur as little more than token acknowledgments of, or taken-for-granted assumptions about, the role of futures in education, society and culture.

Gough (1990: 301).

How best, then, might education research respond to such a proliferation of futures discourses in education? This paper begins to map out the contours of a response to this question.

I begin by arguing that progressive education research traditions have long been concerned with resisting the colonisation of the future by dominant interests and have sought to open up the possibility of alternative, better futures through education. I then argue, however, that such research faces two important contemporary challenges: first, that it too often demonstrates limited critical reflexivity in its own ideas of 'the future'; second, that its traditions may prove inadequate for the new challenge of discourses of radically uncertain futures. I conclude by drawing on Barbara Adam, Brian Massumi and Riel Miller to argue that an adequate response to such challenges may require researchers to insistently renew their focus on the rich and creative possibilities of the present. Two strategies are proposed to support such a focus on the present, the first is the use of play as a resource for making visible contingencies that might open up new possibilities; the second is the exploration of culturally diverse futures metaphors, in particular those which are premised upon reciprocity to guarantee the continuation of social relationships in the present.

2. 'The future' and education research

Ideas of the future matter in education (Bussey, Inayatullah, & Milojevic, 2008; Milojevic, 2005). Policymakers' assumptions about what the future might bring shape investment and legislation. Educators' future visions shape their conversations with students and their personal commitments to teaching (Bateman, 2012). Ideas of the future are profoundly embedded in assumptions about children's development and growth (Lee, 2001); and as Adam and Groves argue, each day we ask young people to project themselves into 'the realm of the not yet' (2007). At the same time, education is a site in which many of society's hopes and aspirations for the future are invested. Indeed, the growth of mass education coincided with the construction of young people as 'fragments of the future' (Lee, 2001), as subjects for investment by the State to act as insurance against the unknown. The assumed causal relationship between educational investment and the future life-chances of individuals and wellbeing of societies means that discussions of education, in particular curriculum, are often conducted on the terrain of competing visions of the future (Young, 1998).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, progressive and critical education researchers have long taken an interest in the ideas of the future that proliferate in education. The discursive construction of the future in policy and curriculum documents, and the tenuous and partial nature of the evidence upon which they are built, for example, forms a familiar part of many critical policy analyses in education, whether in the technology arena (Selwyn, 2011) or in the claims being made about the future of work and the economy (Ball, 2010; Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). Gough's searing analysis of Australian educational policy-making definitively demonstrates the largely rhetorical and ideological function of 'the future' as it is mobilised in curriculum and policy discourse (Gough, 1990).

In the classroom, the desire to build better, more equitable, more sustainable futures has led many progressive educators to seek to unsettle the temporal (and historical) illiteracy which suggests that things are now the way they always have been and always will be (e.g. Giroux, 1990/2011; Stenhouse, 1975). Wrigley, Thomson and Lingard's 'Changing Schools' (2011) for example, is the latest in a tradition of education research that follows Raymond Williams injunction that the purpose of progressive education is to 'make hope practical'. Indeed, in their words, their aim is to make visible the sorts of educational practices that 'provide good reasons for hope' in order to support the 'struggle towards a better future' (12).

More recent years have also seen a resurgence of Utopian thinking in educational philosophy and sociology. This approach is informed by an awareness of the limitations of an educational politics founded on critique alone (Apple, 2010) and, theoretically, it has been fuelled by sociologist Erik Olin Wright's (2010) call for 'real utopias' to counter colonising capitalist visions of the future. One way in which this thinking manifests itself is in the resurgence of the idea of the school as a site located outside its current time, as a pre-cursor to a more desirable future. In this strand of contemporary research, the school is conceptualised as a site of 'prefigurative practice' (Boggs, 1977/78); a space in which people might participate in human relationships that are not yet available in wider society (see, for example, Fielding & Moss, 2010). In research texts, this call for 'real utopias' is manifesting itself in thought experiments designed to carefully imagine alternative futures for schools and the pathways that might enable their realisation. Fielding and Moss, for example, draw on historical and geographical sources to support their claims for the plausibility of their blueprint for a new Common School. In my own work, I have used 'grounded fiction' to combine evidence of long-term environmental and social trends with contemporary progressive educational practice (Facer, 2011). Kieran Egan's (2007) book *The Future of Education* is classically utopian, describing an ideal future for education and combining this vision with a 'backcasting' technique that describes the actions, decisions and events that would have to occur to enable this to be realised.

The future, therefore, is not absent from education research traditions, and progressive education researchers in particular have long been concerned with critiquing dominant futures and attempting to build alternatives through or for education. In this paper, however, I will argue that such research may now need to move beyond critique of dominant futures discourses and the production of idealised alternatives if it is to provide a robust basis for responses to the ever more strident calls to insert the future into educational policy making. To do so I will argue first, that there is a need for much greater critical reflection on the ideas of the future that are produced through such research. As Green argues, progressive and critical education research itself needs: *[to become] critical and properly sceptical about the very rhetoric of futures, because all around us media magnates like Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer, and also people like Bill Gates, are skillfully and energetically peddling futures, as a business and marketing strategy (1990, 66)*. It is not sufficient, therefore, for education research to simply insert new rhetorical futures into the proliferation of public futures discourses, instead, the future needs to be treated as a reality in emergence for which we have responsibility and about which we have limited knowledge (Adam & Groves, 2007). Second, I will argue that the discourses of radical uncertainty that dominate what Beck calls the period of 'Second Modernity' (2011) may require a new approach that restates the present rather than the future as the source of possibility and agency. These two challenges are concerned with better understanding the productive possibilities of the present. It is with these two challenges that the remainder of the paper is concerned.

3. Challenge 1: From rhetoric and resistance to critical reflection on the future

The future as a category could be understood to play the same role for some education researchers as 'the past' does for some conservatives; it is treated with a form of future-facing nostalgia. In many progressive educational accounts, for example, 'the future' is often simply used as a synonym for 'better', as a repository for hopes and aspirations for change, as a site of resistance against the conditions of the present. The converse is also true, treating the future as a repository for fears and demons, for all the dangers – poverty, climate change, exploitation – from which education should protect children and society. Such ideas of the future are rhetorically useful, but as a basis for effecting change in the present, they are problematic. Such mythic futures can become abstractions that lack the plausibility and urgency to act as a powerful rationale for change. Conversely, they can be used to silence debate and obscure challenge to changes forced through in the name of future necessity.

Where education researchers have sought to move beyond rhetoric to treat the future as a reality in emergence, however, the difficulties of 'researching the future' become visible. David Halpin's pre-millennial paper 'Utopian Realism and a new politics of education' (1999), for example, argues for the need to treat 'the future' not as a rhetorical idea but as a located space and time with particular characteristics. In his call for realistic utopias in education, he argues that education researchers should begin to take into account 'detectable trends' about which there is 'broad agreement'. He identifies these as: the growth of global markets, the advance of technology, the emergence of new individualism, the breakdown of old structures of the life cycle, and the rise of ecological politics (Halpin, 1999: 352). To give another more popular example, Guy Claxton's book 'What's the Point of School' presents a list of features of the 'new kind of world' that should inform designs for education, including:

- social regulation and social anarchy [including] the disappearance of shame [...]
- the effects of increasing long-distance travel, and the 24/7 society [...]
- the increasing North-South global divide [...]
- The effect of the rise of women on the place and identity of men
- The effect of living in a complex miasma of chemicals [...]
- The development of nuclear technology in the Islamic world
- How to care for the increasingly elderly population
- Increasing competition for scarce resources
- The decline of some religions and the rise of fundamentalism [...] (Claxton, 2008: 31)

The difficulty with such attempts to treat the future as real rather than rhetorical is that in presenting these lists of social, economic and technological trends, possible futures are transformed into inevitable futures to be resisted or challenged, a positioning that risks strengthening their mythic status and obscuring the conditions of their construction.

One response to such a critique might be to develop more precise analyses of possible future change in relation to specific areas. Such an approach potentially offers important gains for educational design. Rather than invoking the future as a set of inevitable trends, researchers might want instead to ask: *'when precisely is this future we need to prepare for? Is it tomorrow, the next three-five years, the next two decades, or the next century? What reversals might be envisaged? What obstacles might it hit?* The process of answering such questions brings a recognition that futures will have as much complexity as histories; that social, environmental, political and technological change will occur unevenly, at different speeds, with unintended consequences and unexpected interactions (Bell, 2010; Inayatullah, 2007; Milojevic, 2005; Slaughter, 2005).

Applied to the question of climate disruption and its implications for education, for example, a refusal to work with broad statements about the future encourages questions such as: is the 'climate change' schools are to prepare for the disruptions of the next ten years when freak weather events may begin to cause localised disruption or is it the radical social upheaval of the next fifty years when massive population movements may be required? Is it in the UK where wine growers may welcome

warmer weather but pest populations explode, or in Africa where swathes of land may become uninhabitable? Is it over a century when we may decline to a global population of 1 billion or have developed new forms of energy supply, materials use and food resources capable of supporting a much larger population?

Similarly, applied to economic issues, asking when and where the future 'knowledge economy' is emerging encourages attention to the ways in which different groups, communities and countries may be affected and encourages analysis that extends beyond the first wave 'impacts' of such highly visible current trends as Chinese, Indian and Latin American economic growth. A shift towards specificity about different timescales for economic change, for example, makes visible contemporary changes from the disaggregation of the R&D functions of major corporations, to the longer-term implications of the fertility decline in Asia and to the mid-term growth of Chinese-African collaboration. Such specificity makes visible the uneven contours of such change and helps guard against knee jerk and 'catch-up' education policies that simply chase after parity in PISA scores today.

Asking when and where is the future for which education needs to prepare, in other words, enables a closer examination of the potential efficacy of the education strategies that are being proposed to respond to these ideas of the future. If there are calls for education for sustainability, for example, asking questions such as *sustainability when? for whom? over what timescale? with what consequences?* requires engagement with the different factors that will enable or militate against such sustainability. This greater specificity will help to inform judgements about the relative merits of calls for school gardens, food box schemes, poverty alleviation or more generalised community-wide or global attempts to build resilience. In other words, asking when and where is the future helps to shift educational thinking beyond future-facing nostalgia, and moves into the realm of critical reflection on strategic action.

Another difficulty of the necessary attempt to treat the future as an emergent reality rather than a rhetorical flourish is that the basis upon which some 'trends' are excluded as subjects for concern while others are foregrounded, is often obscured. Indeed, even the two examples from Halpin and Claxton's work show the extent to which ideas of 'the future' are always constructed through a process of selection and omission depending on the educational philosophies and values guiding the author. The reason why Claxton raises the issues of shame, male identity, and religion while Halpin does not, for example, is not because he has more privileged foresight of the future but because his research interests in creativity, learning and the brain mean that these sorts of potential future developments matter more to him than to Halpin as they are concerned with sense of self and belief. The futures that researchers are interested in are inevitably the futures that potentially relate to their own interests and concerns.

One consequence of an increased sensitivity to the inevitable partiality of any 'realist' accounts of the future and to the complexity of the future that emerges after even the most cursory attempt to map the temporal and geographical nuances of any trend, must be the awareness of the need to approach 'futures' in education with modesty. Here, again, there are important gains to be achieved for education research, gains which would potentially be hastened by drawing on the insights of those researchers who have taken critical reflection on 'the future' as their core disciplinary concern.

There is not space here to map out the full complexity of research that supports systematic critical reflection on 'the future'. Indeed, the field of Futures Studies alone operates across academic, governmental, non-governmental and commercial sectors and draws in researchers and practitioners from fields as diverse as sociology, economics, philosophy, game theory, defense, environmental studies, psychology and computing (Bell, 2010; Slaughter, 2005). There is, unsurprisingly, no unified theoretical or methodological framework that binds these researchers together (Ogilvy, 2010) other than a shared concern with the epistemology of 'the future' and with understanding the implications of ideas about the future for action in the present. This is not to mention the geographers, sociologists and philosophers (e.g. de Jouvenal, Thrift, Adams, Arendt) who have contributed to the theorisation of 'the future' yet who would not identify themselves as 'futurologists' or 'futures researchers'.

What is characteristic of recent traditions of futures research and what is particularly useful for the discussion in this paper, however, is a growing confidence in adopting an orientation towards the future that restlessly resists closure and that systematically seeks to open up awareness of and routes towards multiple futures. This commitment to holding multiple futures in view is what Jay Ogilvy (2010) calls the 'scenaric stance'; a stance which, in Miller's (2011) terms, '*abandon[s] the false choices between pessimism and optimism, hope and fear, we grasp indeterminacy without eschewing the closure of the now.*' (1) In practical terms, such a stance is usually achieved through the systematic reflection on the multiplicity of scenarios that might emerge from the intersection between historic trends and emerging events, and by the explicit recognition that such alternative futures are the product of different concerns and positions in the present. There are a range of different approaches to the production of such scenarios, from the Hawaii'an school tradition of systematically considering the possibility of four competing possible futures – of business as usual, collapse, management and transition (Dator, 2008); to Miller's call for systematic exploration of the extent, pace and reach of any development trajectory (Miller, 2011); to Milojevic and Inayatullah's use of discourse analysis to surface and critique the myths and narratives of contemporary life as a basis for telling multiple divergent stories (Inayatullah, 2007; Milojevic, 2005). Common to all of them, however, is a commitment to holding the possibility of multiple possible futures in mind, to the idea of futures as 'authored' and situated in their production and to exploring the implications of these diverse futures for action in the present.

Such a commitment to multiple futures resists what Illich (cited in Cayley (1992/2007)) called the 'apocalyptic randiness' that seeks to replace one vision of the future with another of inevitable disaster; or that seeks simply to mobilise the futures that are most convenient for the present argument; or that ignores the inconvenient factors that might militate against the futures we desire. Instead, it seeks systematically to hold open the potential for multiple possible futures as a basis for

reflecting carefully on the choices that are open to social actors in the present. Importantly for the present discussion, the scenaric stance also presents itself as partial and authored: the decisions and choices that inform the description of these multiple futures are foregrounded; the values and contemporary problems that drive the scenario development process are clearly stated.

In educational practice, the scenaric stance cautions against what Gough describes as the careless tampering with children's ideas about the future in pursuit of their 'correction' with appropriate ideas and visions (Gough, 1990). It acts, in other words, as a bulwark against education as indoctrination of any sort and recasts 'history as a participative practice' (Doctorow, 2011) in which actions in the present and the past create multiple latent futures (Adam & Groves, 2007). In the education research field, it offers a practical means of discussing possible futures without reifying them into inevitable forces that become self-fulfilling prophecies.

In summary, progressive education has powerful traditions of research and practice that have done much to challenge the colonisation of ideas of the future by dominant groupings, often by presenting alternative future visions as a basis for collective action (Sugrue, 2008). Given the massive proliferation of futures discourses in education at the present time, however, the production of alternative future visions alone is no longer sufficient, risking simply becoming part of the brouhaha surrounding the future of education. Instead, progressive education traditions now also need to be informed by a principled commitment to the scenaric stance, to interrogating the future as an emergent and highly contoured reality that is resistant to foreclosure as much by progressive accounts as by those they seek to counter. Such a stance would respect the necessary limits of foresight and act as a basis for responsible, tentative actions that are sensitive to the potential for unintended consequences and radical disruptions in complex systems (Adam & Groves, 2007).

4. Challenge 2: the difficulties of the scenaric stance in liquid modernity

The adoption of the scenaric stance, however, has strategic risks for progressive educators and researchers in a period characterised variously as the 'risk society' (Beck, 2006) or 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2006) in which institutions are seen as subject to significant ongoing reconfiguration in the light of global, technological and economic forces and where the necessarily self-producing, constantly changing individual is understood as the locus of responsibility and agency (Popkewitz, 2007). In these conditions, as Rosenberg and Harding observe:

Futures today seem to be reproducing themselves faster and more cheaply than ever. At the same time, their shelf lives appear to be getting shorter. Any child can historicise them for you, can tell you in a minute which future is up to date and which is already over, which doesn't run fast enough on the current microprocessor and which doesn't run at all'
Rosenberg and Harding (2005: 3).

In this climate, and intensified since 9/11, the dominant narrative of the future is one of radical uncertainty allied with an increasing individualisation of risk in the face of this uncertainty (Bauman, 2006; Beck, 2011). Military terminology is being adopted in business sectors to characterise the contemporary period as a 'VUCA' world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (Steihm, 2002). In other words, as a world in which traditional planning processes premised upon assumptions of continuous trends, upon definable factors and closed systems and upon the ability to 'interpret the signs' is being called into question. This narrative of uncertainty is being mobilised to justify new forms of political, military and economic intervention. Brian Massumi's analysis of post 9/11 military and economic policy, for example, demonstrates how 'the American Way' of facing the unknown future captured in Lincoln's phrase that 'the best way to predict the future is to build it', has been distorted into a logic of pre-emption. This logic of pre-emption, Massumi argues, is used to justify bringing unspecified future threats into being in order to 'pre-empt' them. Faced with the anxiety of unknown, unspecified future risks, Massumi argues:

In Bush administration parlance, you "go kinetic." You leap into action on a level with the potential that frightens you. You do that, once again, by inciting the potential to take an actual shape you can respond to. You trigger a production of what you fear. You turn the objectively indeterminate cause into an actual effect so you can actually deal with it in some way. Any time you feel the need to act, then all you have to do is actuate a fear. The production of the effect follows as smoothly as a reflex.

Massumi (2007: 19).

His examples include the intervention in Iraq to 'counter the threat of terror' which served to bring such terror activities into existence and therefore to justify the action. Pre-emption, Massumi argues, is a logic of conditionality – this might happen, this could happen, we do not know enough about it, it must be brought into the open so that we can act on it. It works by intentionally bringing into being the events and the fears it claims to be fighting. The key feature of this orientation to the future is to present the future as profoundly unknowable and to present this unknown future as a source of anxiety, a problem to be managed, a fear to be overcome. Uncertainty is the problem, to which action to create knowledge about the future, even if that means bringing about the futures we fear, is the answer.

Such an orientation towards the future seems a long way from the concerns of education. However, this logic of pre-emption too neatly coincides with the rise of the pharmacological society (Rose, 2010) with its logic of early identification of children 'at risk' and battery of tools for parents and educators being created by the medical and cognitive sciences. These allow the 'flushing out' of potential threats to children's learning through tests and investigations that will serve to 'surface'

or instantiate a range of risks to children that can then be acted upon and fixed. The debates over ADHD and dyslexia and over pre-natal testing for 'genetic defects' are the outriders to a logic of pre-emption in education that threatens to escalate over the next decade as the relationship between biosciences and education becomes more entangled (Facer, 2011; Rose, 2010).

In this context a commitment by education researchers to the scenaric stance and its principled resistance to foreclosure of the future becomes potentially problematic. After all, the commitment to the scenaric stance is a commitment to an unknowable future, an orientation which does little to contest the epistemological claims of the logic of pre-emption. The challenge therefore is to find a way of retaining a commitment to the openness of the future without becoming complicit with the neo-liberal, militaristic and pharmacological logic of pre-emption.

Both Massumi and the futurist Riel Miller make an important contribution to this challenge by making a very simple point: the future, they emphasise, does not exist and therefore cannot be known, even if it is constantly in production in the present. It is the anxiety about seeking to know, manage and reduce the risks of the future that underpins the logic of pre-emption. Rather than seeking to assuage this anxiety of not knowing the future and seeking ever more perfect knowledge of it through pre-emption, they argue, such uncertainty can instead be understood as a creative resource that enables us to act better in the present. As Miller argues:

The challenge is not that we must find ways to 'know' the future, rather we need to find ways to live and act with not-knowing the future (1, 2011)

Massumi talks of the freedom and potential that such an orientation might bring:

[...] in every situation there are any number of levels of organisation and tendencies in play, in cooperation with each other or at cross-purposes. The way all the elements interrelate is so complex that it isn't necessarily comprehensible in one go. There's always a sort of vagueness surrounding the situation, an uncertainty about where you might be able to go and what you might be able to do once you exit that particular context. This uncertainty can actually be empowering – once you realise that it gives you a margin of manoeuvrability and you focus on that, rather than on projecting success or failure. It gives you the feeling that there is always an opening to experiment, to try and see. This brings a sense of potential to the situation. The present's 'boundary condition', to borrow a phrase from science, is never a closed door. It is an open threshold – a threshold of potential.

Brian Massumi in Zournazi (2003: 212).

Underpinning this shift in perspective is a fundamental rethinking of the locus of possibility and hence agency, away from the future to the present. Rather than conceiving of the future as a space in which possibilities and risks are laid out before us, and where the challenge is to uncover and carefully select between them, Miller argues, drawing on Bergson, that the relationship between action and possibility should be reversed. It is choices and actions in the present, he argues, that are the source of the creative production of possibilities. This perspective changes the dominant metaphor for our orientation towards the future. Rather than envisaging ourselves walking forwards into a future in which choices are laid out before us and from which we must choose, carefully selecting paths to avoid risks and fears. Instead, we might imagine ourselves walking backwards into an unknowable future, in which possibilities flow out behind us from our actions.

We must resign ourselves to the inevitable: it is the real which makes itself possible, and not the possible which becomes real. But the truth is that philosophy has never frankly admitted this continuous creation of unforeseeable novelty.

Bergson (1946: 123) quoted in Miller (2011).

The challenge for education research, from this perspective, is not to produce ever more accurate predictions of the future and to seek to pre-empt that future when our fore-knowledge fails but, as Miller argues, to begin to better understand and exploit the creative possibilities of not-knowing the future. For this, we may need new tools.

5. Discussion

In the light of these observations I want to conclude this paper by tentatively proposing two inter-related trajectories for education research that might offer a way of responding to the proliferation of futures discourses in education today. Together, I hope they may begin to offer resources for nurturing the sensitivity of researchers and educators to the restless creation of possibility in the present while resisting the risks of complicity with the individualising narratives of liquid modernity.

First, I want to suggest that paying attention to the power of contingency might function as a useful resource for sensitising us to the creative possibilities of the present. As Tsing and Pollman argue:

Why is Thai food so spicy? (the Portuguese brought chilli peppers to South-east Asia from Brazil.) How did Arab and Chinese tools help sixteenth-century Europeans aim their guns? (The concept of triangulation was introduced by combining European versions of the Arab astrolabe and the Chinese compass into a surveying plane table with which target distances could be measured.) Unexpected connections can make new things come into being. New technologies, new economies, new identities and political visions: futures of all sorts are forged in the contingencies of

strange connections. . . we might look for our best hopes (as well as our inchoate terrors) in the possibilities of something different.

Tsing and Pollman (2005: 107).

Contingency, made visible through story-telling, play and conversation, Tsing and Pollman argue, is a resource for resisting the 'lock-step' trudge towards an assumption of inevitable futures either of progress or repression. To promote such sensitivity to contingency, however, requires new tools. To that end, these researchers have designed a 'futures game'. In this game, players pick up cards with random images on them of everything from the Hollywood sign to a teapot to a young boy. Once they have picked up these cards, they are required to imagine 'coalescences' between these events and forces. A coalescence is, as in the case of the astrolabe and compass above, a merging of different events in which both actors are changed. An image of Hollywood and an image of the Taj Mahal, for example, might give rise to Bollywood. The aim of the game is to narrate the potential for coalescences from a range of different images, and, in so doing, to open up the potential for looking differently at the world around us, for seeing latent within it the new forms of action that will in turn generate new possibilities. As Tsing and Pollman argue:

Political cultures depend on directing and disciplining our sense of time and change. As long as we imagine the future along the set trajectories of today's categories, we will find ourselves treading in the ruts they have set out for us. Instead, the game looks for the alternative trajectories that might spring up. We turn to contingent connections to disengage our stories of the future from current geopolitics and knowledge hierarchies.

Tsing and Pollman (2005: 121).

Such an approach, rather than treating the present as the impoverished handmaiden to 'a brighter future' or as the ante-room to the apocalypse, instead sees the present as an abundant resource, a site of rich and powerful possibilities. It asks how we might make visible the creative resources that we have around us today to open up new forms of action. In this way, it echoes moves in development literature to seek out examples of 'positive deviance' (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010), and in education to value and understand the existing and latent assets of local communities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Moll & Gonzales, 2005). It foregrounds what Miller calls the 'creative novelty' of not knowing the future, and Massumi's articulation of the excess, the perpetual remainder of possibility and alternatives, that remains after every action:

you can't even say that a body ever coincides with its affective dimension. It is selecting from it, extracting and actualising certain potentials from it. You can think of affect in the broadest sense as what remains of the potential after each or every thing a body says or does – as a perpetual bodily remainder. Looked at from a different angle, this perpetual remainder is an excess. It's like a reserve of potential or newness or creativity that is experienced alongside every actual production of meaning in language or in any performance of a useful function – vaguely but directly experienced, as something more, a more to come, a life overspilling as it gathers itself up to move on.

Brian Massumi in Zournazi (2002: 1).

It is in making visible this excess, in surfacing the impossibility of closing down the creative contingency of the present, that the real potential to challenge the logic of pre-emption in education today might lie. Rather than seeking simply to replace the banal narratives of 'global change' and 'uncertainty' with competing narratives of progress, we might want to celebrate the latent and powerful potential for surprise, disruption and novelty in existence in young people, in schools, in society.

In this way, the research field might look beyond the academy, to the creative practices of everyday life that are emerging as the war for public space is being fought around the world (Hou, 2010; Mahony, 2012). Researchers might look to the youth and digital-culture-led 'ludicity' movements that see city centres being taken over by thousands of young people playing in the city and reclaiming its use for different purposes.¹ Researchers might look to the guerilla gardening movements, making visible the ways in which a local street might be reimagined as a country park. Researchers might look to the graffiti artists redesignating the walls of cities, towns and villages as sites for popular debate. Such actions reconceive the boundaries of the possible within the frame of the present. Rather than replacing narratives of business as usual with the 'apocalyptic randiness' of future fears, the challenge for futures-oriented education research, then, may be to begin to seek out and experiment with the methods and resources to tell new stories of the present.

The second trajectory I would like to suggest, requires a recognition that the metaphors we use for the future, and the tools we have developed as a result – whether scenario planning or stockmarket trading – are culturally specific. This recognition opens up the possibility of exploring other ways of thinking about the future. For example, we might explore how the rich resource of 'other' futures literacies and cultures such as those characterised by indigenous, feminist and spiritual futures practices, might reframe our perception of the present (Adam & Groves, 2007; Milojevic, 2005). These futures literacies operate with different futures metaphors premised upon, for example, process, cyclical and reciprocal models of time. Such orientations towards the future open up new ways of 'seeing' the possibilities of the present.

Consider, for example, Adams' analysis of cultures in which the future is guaranteed through relationships of gift giving and reciprocity. Rather than seeking to 'know' the future, such cultures seek to build the sorts of relationships of mutual

¹ See, for example, the Interesting Games Festival http://igfest.org/and Ludocity: http://ludocity.org/wiki/Main_Page (last referenced 12.01.12).

interdependence that will guarantee reciprocity and wellbeing in the future. In futures-oriented education research, such a way of seeing the future might help us usefully to reframe the debate about the sorts of futures discourses that dominate education at present, such as those that characterise the ‘Shift Happens’ slideshow I discussed at the beginning of the paper. For example, rather than desperately seeking to guess what the future economy and labour market will bring in a ‘knowledge economy’, such an orientation towards the present and the future might take a different approach. It would begin by looking for examples in the present that are enabling people to achieve economic resilience today through relationships of exchange, reciprocity and circularity. One example of this, for example, is the Transition movement. This seeks to build a profound understanding of place, its resources and its social relationships as a means of strengthening in the present those relationships of interdependence that will create longstanding commitments into the future for mutuality and care. The emerging Transition Education movement is beginning to model this different orientation to the present and the future with a strategy that disrupts conventional ideas of schooling as an exchange, and instead asks students and learners and mentors to play roles of mutual learning and shared work. Rather than seeing education as a future investment it sees education as a process of mutual development and action in the present. It is early days for such ideas, but such activities demonstrate the creative possibility of asking how the present rather than the future might be a resource for optimism and for solidarity in the creation of possibility.

To conclude, then: educators today are increasingly being asked to take the future into account. If the education research field is to develop an adequate response to such demands, it has a powerful resource to draw upon in the long history of critical and progressive education studies that have sought to unsettle dominant accounts of the future. It needs to enhance such work with the development of robust, reflective and responsible accounts of the *multiple* possible futures which might emerge from the complexity of the present. Most importantly, however, education research needs to resist the lure of seeking ever more precise knowledge about the future and instead, to find ways to mobilise *the present* as a resource of powerful contingency and possibility. In restating the creative novelty of the present, researchers will create a ‘bone in the throat’ (MacLure, 2006) that prevents the easy digestion of stories of inevitable futures, whether of decay or delight.

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