Knowledge producing schools, participatory action research and transformative educational agendas for changed and changing times

Introduction
Commenting on the challenges associated with understanding and responding to the needs of contemporary children and youth, Douglas Rushkoff made the claim that:

The degree of change experienced by the past three generations rivals that of a species in mutation. Today’s ‘screenager’—the child born into a culture mediated by the television and computer—is interacting with his [sic passim] world in at least as dramatically altered a fashion from his grandfather as the first sighted creature did from his blind ancestors, or a winged one from his earthbound forebears…what we need to adapt to, more than any particular change, is the fact that we are changing so rapidly. We must learn to accept change as a constant. Novelty is the new status quo (Rushkoff, 1996: 3)

Rushkoff is neither the first nor the only theorist to draw attention to apparently dramatic differences between the worlds inhabited by past, current and future human generations. Authors from a wide range of backgrounds have commented on the changing environments, interests and capacities of contemporary youth, seeking to capture their distinctiveness through labels such as Generation X (Coupland, 1991),

I look to the future because that's where I'm going to spend the rest of my life.--George Burns, 1983
Generation Y\(^1\), the net generation (Tapscott, 1999), ‘thumb culture’\(^2\); ‘screenagers’ (Rushkoff, 1996), millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000) and so on. Many of these attempts at categorisation are followed by attempts to draw attention to the specific challenges associated with providing meaningful educational opportunities for students who—to some teachers—almost appear to be ‘aliens in the classroom’ (Green & Bigum, 1993).

This chapter outlines one approach to contemporary schooling designed to help teachers move beyond a largely descriptive (and often pessimistic or nostalgic) acknowledgement of changed and changing circumstances (and the related gap between the experiences of teachers and students) towards more optimistic, pro-active educational programs that maximise opportunities for diverse students—no matter how alien they may at first glance appear to be—to cope productively with a future in which change is constant and novelty is the status quo.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first we acknowledge the range of challenges that the contemporary environment poses for educators and put forward the concept of ‘future proofing’ as a way of conceptualising the purpose of education. In the second we link the aspirational goal of future proofing to philosophical ideas associated with participatory action research. In the third we draw upon both frameworks to analyse the transformative potential of a particular set of educational initiatives, known collectively as the Knowledge Producing Schools project or KPS.

### Part one: Education, future proofing and changed and changing times

The practical, economic, technological and ideological dimensions of this ceaseless change poses significant challenges. Educators are asked to provide not only the kinds of operational skills that may be meaningful in the employment, lifestyle and leisure activities of the future—how do we use technology X? what do we do with technology Y?—but also cultural skills necessary for understanding the different modes of behaviour and interaction that are valid and valued within particular contexts (behaviour A is appropriate in one context, but not in another) and finally the kinds of critical capacities which enable us to look at where particular patterns of behaviour have come from, and how we, ourselves, may contribute to either producing or contesting dominant ideological positions on a diverse range of topics.

The first challenge facing educators, then, is to acknowledge that we can no longer even pretend to be in the business of providing students with one particular set of skills which will equip them for a relatively stable and largely uninterrupted career in one particular industry and trade. With the possible exception of literacy and numeracy skills there are few capacities that can now lay claim to an unproblematic alignment between the skill and a specific career path.

Such an acknowledgement has the immediate effect of shifting attention away from the kinds of specific skills that kids will need in the future towards the kinds of dispositions that will enable them to acquire and demonstrate whatever skills are demanded of them in their future work, personal and social lives.

We have argued elsewhere these dispositions might include:

- A critical understanding of the changed/changing social, political and economic environments,
- A strong sense of self
- The ability to live harmoniously in a community characterised by social and cultural diversity
- A positive attitude to life long and life wide learning
- The resultant potential to contribute to the intellectual, emotional and economic future well-being of the nation (Rowan, 2007)

---

1 The earliest citation according to WordSpy (http://www.wordspy.com/words/GenerationY.asp) is attributed to Scott L. Kuehl, "Am I obsolete?," The Record (Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario), July 22, 1992.
Underpinning this list is the belief that all students are entitled to develop a positive disposition towards knowledge work, which includes learning, teaching, producing and sharing knowledge. We use the term knowledge work here to locate students with other, more commonly acknowledged knowledge workers, such as teachers (Kincheloe, 2006).

This brings us to the concept of future proofing. The term itself is derived from technology contexts where it refers to a technology possessing the greatest chance of remaining current into the future. We use the term in the context of educational debates to signal the responsibility that schools have to provide students with the kinds of robust and durable skills and dispositions that equip them to cope with increasing levels of change and uncertainty (as well as increasing political and ideological tension). This is not to suggest that schooling can function as some kind of guaranteed inoculation against whatever may await us in the future. Rather, a future proofing mindset emphasises the importance of providing students with the kinds of meta-skills outlined above that are most likely to be useful to them regardless of what happens in the future.

Central to this mindset is a willingness to acknowledge that previous and dominant approaches to education have not offered all students access to successful futures. Indeed, despite years of equity based reforms—focused on issues including gender, cultural background, disability, and socio-economics—some groups of children remain more likely than others to experience educational failure. Attempts to move beyond this scenario require not the adoption of a new educational slogan—individualised learning, personalised learning, authentic learning—but rather some fundamental change in the way schools operate. Future proofing, in this sense, becomes an aspiration motivated by a belief in the need for, and possibility of change.

Any future proofing project, therefore, must be based on the core belief that schools can make a difference to how individual, and groups of, kids approach the future. This leads to the second key point. In order to take up the idea of future proofing as an educational aspiration, educators themselves must be willing to accept that the future is not a fixed reality out there that will come to us. We—teachers, parents, students, citizens—are not passive. Rather we have the capacity (albeit with different levels of authority) to contribute to the way that future develops.

To this end future proofing can be seen as aligned with an educational philosophy known as ‘educated hope’. Ruth Levitas (1993: 257) describes educated hope as “the desire for a better way of living expressed in the description of a different kind of society that makes possible that alternative way of life.” Extending this point, Henry Giroux (2003) describes “educated hope” as a language:

of resistance and possibility, a language that embraces a militant utopianism while constantly being attentive to those forces that seek to turn such hope into a new slogan or punish and dismiss those who dare look beyond the horizon of the given. Hope as a form of militant utopianism is one of the preconditions for individual and social struggle, the ongoing practice of critical education in a wide variety of sites—the attempt to make a difference by being able to imagine otherwise in order to act in other ways.

He goes on to say:

Educated hope also demands a certain amount of courage on the part of intellectuals in that it demands from them the necessity to articulate social possibilities, mediate the experience of injustice as part of a broader attempt to contest the workings of oppressive power, undermine various forms of domination, and fight for alternative ways to imagine the future.

The key point made by Giroux here is that education is always, and inevitably, not only about providing students with particular skill sets, but also about demonstrating to students that futures are not fixed or already determined (regardless of how this may seem). For this idealistic sentiment to become a reality, however, all students need opportunities to see themselves as skilled, active, productive members of a community. The next question is how to move beyond this aspirational moment to new performances of
schooling within which future proofing is a realistic goal. This leads us to the role of action research—more specifically, participatory action research—in shaping and re-shaping transformative educational agendas.

Part two: educated hope, future proofing and participatory action research

Other chapters in this book illustrate a range of different enactments of action research. Here we are interested in the ways that the kind of philosophical disposition associated with participatory action research (hereafter PAR) can help to shape, reshape and, indeed, evaluate the kind of KPS initiatives outlined in the next section. Our purpose in drawing upon PAR is not so much to provide another articulation of what it looks like or how it might work. This is well documented in a large and diverse literature which takes in a broad family of approaches and practices (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). Our goal is to focus on the ways a genuine commitment to the principles underpinning PAR, taken alongside an awareness of the persistence of educational disadvantage despite so called changing times, supports educators seeking to focus on new kinds of questions. Specifically, we will look at the ways in which the mindset offered by PAR helps to foreground and justify a commitment within KPS schools to changing the relationship between students and their futures.

Clearly this constitutes a certain departure from the traditional uses of action research. In the following sections of this chapter we will explore the ways in which the ideological goals of PAR can be seen to shape a particular approach to schooling. Here it is necessary to identify the key principles of PAR that align with the future proofing agenda outlined above.

Firstly, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) describe participatory action research as:

…a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out

It is common for reflections on the various phases of action research to identify four key ‘moments’ in an on going spiral or cycle: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The collaborative nature of PAR is as Kemmis and McTaggart argue a necessary condition:

the approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members (1988: 5).

Central to this definition is the active role of participants in the pursuit of transformative educational agendas. As Grundy (1994:35) puts it:

Rather, what action research provides is a set of principles for procedure. One of these principles is clearly the principle of participation. It is not only experience in schools which has shown that real change is dependent upon ‘ownership’ of the change, which is in turn dependent upon participation in the decisions leading to the change by those most affected by that change. …

Participation brings with it, however, not merely autonomy but also responsibility. Action research is grounded in principles which allow for both autonomy and responsibility. These are the commitments to action and reflection. Action research does not simply mandate the taking of action by participants to bring about change, it also calls those participants to account by including the obligation for action to be grounded in and evaluated through research.

When the intent of a future proofing mindset is set alongside an articulation of the principles of action research the synergies and consistencies are clear. Taken together, the concept of educated hope, and both the philosophical and methodological dimensions of PAR offer powerful lenses for reconceptualizing education. They acknowledge and prioritise the need to move beyond the reproduction of social inequities
towards schooling and social systems that are genuinely able to meet the needs of diverse students into the, largely unpredictable, future.

In this chapter we are arguing that one way to disrupt the traditional relationship between “at risk” students and schools and to achieve the kind of participant empowerment central to PAR is to look at the question of the relationships fostered within schooling more broadly. There are four kinds of relationships we see as particularly important: relationships between schools and knowledge work; between students and schools; between students and teachers; and between schools, students, teachers and their communities.

Schools have historically been situated as consumers of knowledge. In this context, the good teacher is one who transmits a set of knowledge, and a good student is one who can reproduce (at least in the short term) that same body of knowledge. An “at risk” student is one who is unable or unwilling to achieve these outcomes. By extension, the role of community is generally limited. Parents and caregivers are called on predominantly as the audience for the various products produced by students, and, occasionally, as support staff to carry on or reinforce the work carried out at school.

For some students, these traditional relationships are undoubtedly more successful than for others. But even those students who possess the kinds of cultural capital that enable them to be good at ‘doing school’ are not necessarily being given the opportunity to develop the capacities that are essential to the contemporary context and its futures. In other words, traditional schooling positions students (and to some extent teachers) in a generally passive role as either the distributors or consumers of particular, authorised forms of knowledge. This passivity can make only limited contributions to the development of the capacities associated with future proofing outlined above. One of the key questions facing educators, then, is how to go about re-designing curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in order to change the relationships between schools, teachers, students, communities and knowledge work: how to achieve the transformative goals signalled both by PAR research, and critical analysis of educational successes and failures.

In the remainder of this chapter we are interested in exploring a particular way in which these aspirations can be used to shape a specific approach to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. We are motivated here not by a desire to conduct an action research project per se, but rather to use the principles of PAR to reflect retrospectively on the transformative potential of the KPS initiative.

Part three: Knowledge Producing Schools: future proofing in practice

The important thing is not so much that every child should be taught, as that every child-and every adult-should be given the wish to learn.

(Lubbock, 1887)

The KPS framework positions students’ and schools’ relationship to knowledge work as central in an era of increasingly unpredictable futures and rapidly changing contexts. In a challenge to this tradition, KPS projects are about building learning opportunities that address authentic community needs within whole of community contexts and under conditions that are as close as possible to the relevant mature versions of social practice. It is work that results in ‘products’ that approximate as closely as possible to expert productions in scope, approach and quality.

Under these conditions the classroom/school becomes the organising base for learning, but is not the only site in which work occurs. Indeed, a lot of learning activity will spill into spaces beyond the school. In addition, the teacher is no longer the ultimate authority on the knowledge produced. S/he will draw on relevant expertise for the kind of production being undertaken at the time, much of which will come from people who are not school personnel. Within the KPS approach, education becomes a ‘whole of community’ responsibility, and schools become a knowledge producing resource for their communities. As such, participation in real world projects becomes an opportunity for all school members, and not merely for teacher researchers, or external researchers.
These interactions serve the dual purpose of supporting students in the development of knowledge that is relevant and useful within a particular context whilst simultaneously providing individual students with an opportunity to conceptualise themselves in a positive relationship with the community beyond the school. PAR reminds us of the importance of reflecting always on the question of whether it is possible to make a move from seeing students not as only consumers of other people’s knowledge (or even as the beneficiaries of other people’s research); but rather as producers of knowledge in their own right. To this end, the KPS framework emphasizes the value of real world projects—developed and negotiated in conjunction with teachers, students and the community—for developing in students the positive attitude towards knowledge production that is essential to any future proofing project.

By extension, KPS projects do not stop at providing students with opportunities to undertake the research equivalent of ‘busy work’ where they may summarise information that no one really needs and communicate this back to a small audience (generally consisting only of the teacher and occasionally some other students). Instead, KPS projects go beyond these ‘fridge door’ tasks (assignments which are published on the refrigerator door at home) to involve students in work on authentic tasks in the real world with real audiences. These real world tasks are meaningful to a diverse range of students and through KPS type projects, children can understand themselves not only as people who are good at ‘doing school’ but as students—people!—who can be good at ‘doing life.’ The key point here is that, by employing a variety of real world projects, schools have the opportunity to dramatically widen the kinds of skills and behaviours that are valued and rewarded in a schooling context. This means that children with diverse forms of cultural capital have a genuine opportunity to be associated with ‘experts’ who share their interests and thereby develop their own expertise as they learn to participate in specialist communities and experience knowledge work as it is practised by that community (Moore & Young, 2001).

Take for example the case of young Jake: Jake attends a small school in a working class area. Although keen to begin school, Jake began prep with fewer formal pre-literacy skills than some of his peers. For some time, Jake was positioned in the lower groups for reading and numeracy activities. In a KPS project, however, students were involved in building recycling bags, and holders for the bags, to be distributed amongst the school community. This was a student initiative that was put to the local council when students’ observed that their town did not have a well organised recycling program. The commitment to authentic external collaborations gave Jake an opportunity to invite his uncle—a welder—into the school, to discuss with students the best design for the stand. With his uncle, Jake was able to demonstrate his own understanding of design. He felt himself, perhaps for the first time, to have been a leader in the school context and played a key role in the school’s initiative to promote a recycling program in the local community.

KPS work arises in a range of ways. One of us visited the Principal of Villa Primary School. The visit was punctuated by all kinds of interruptions and her trying to finish a presentation about her school’s innovative approach to discipline. One of us, in an attempt to illustrate the kind of work that occurs in a KPS framework, told her the story of a Principal in a KPS site who was asked to give a presentation at a Principal’s conference about the computing initiatives in her school. That Principal went to her Year five students and offered them the task. Those students collected the data, shot video footage, edited it, burned it to a CD and gave the presentation at the conference. At that point, the Principal to whom the story was being told leaped from her chair and hugged the story teller. Students from her school subsequently prepared and gave the presentation about the school’s discipline program at the Principals’ conference.

In this broad mindset, it is not simply a matter of having students do work which might otherwise be carried out by teachers or other adults in the school, it is taking opportunities to promote new kinds of relationships between students, the school and various kinds of knowledge work. In so doing, students develop a sense of being able to act in the world. This is future proofing made as concrete as it is ever likely to be.

While KPS work occurs in single projects it is at its most interesting and empowering when it occurs in a School which has taken up this way of “doing school”. For instance, such was the pervasiveness of this way of thinking in one of the schools with which we worked that students in the first year of primary school took business plans to the Principal about improving their recreational space in the school. On a
later occasion Villa PS was invited, along with another school, to host a visit by OECD dignitaries to the State. Villa was the second school to be visited. At their first visit delegates had met with staff and the Principal, had morning tea and been given a tour of the school by teachers. When the bus arrived at Villa PS a line of year three students met and escorted each member of the delegation into the school, attended to their food, drink and bathroom needs and gave them a personal tour of the school.

In a different example, year one students are concerned for the health and well being of a classmate who has to travel from their home town to a capital city for serious medical treatment. The school has a long history of KPS work that has created a climate of more or less spontaneous project development by students. These students invited the local press to their classroom to conduct a press briefing. Reporters and a photographer came to the class, sat on the tiny year one chairs and made notes as the students told of their classmate’s plight. The story was front page in the local newspaper the next day and attracted television coverage which supported fund raising events to support the family’s travel.

There are many more stories that could be told. Some of them have been described in other places (Bigum, 2002, 2003, 2004). The key features that can be missed in these snapshots is that each real world task is part of a broader school commitment to ensuring that students are able to see themselves as active participants in their learning and, through this process, as competent, motivated, valued producers of knowledge: knowledge about their community and knowledge about themselves. In other words, they are active participants in the research of, and responses to, their community. This knowledge has value not only because of the way it may help to address immediate tasks or problems but because it positions diverse children as equal participants in the kind of action research projects that are often done ‘for’ or ‘to’ or ‘in spite of” them. And because these are real projects and thus multiple and varied in the issues they raise, children have multiple entry points. This means that kids, who may not yet possess the kinds of skills that position others to succeed in traditional written or oral tasks, can find other ways to experience success.

Thus, the central platform of KPS initiatives is the commitment to changing relationships: relationships between students and knowledge work, between students and school, between schools and their community. The real participation and involvement of students in reworking and renegotiating relationships is a key consideration in any KPS work. The autonomy and responsibility of which Grundy (1994) writes is commonplace in KPS work where students exhibit high levels of commitment and professionalism to completing their work. Further, participation in this work nurtures an agency not often found in schools. An agency which helps to be good at doing school, but, more importantly, contributes significantly to their learning to be good at doing life.

To sum up, then, KPS initiatives can be seen to combine the ideas and reflections associated with PAR and a range of equity based educational writings through a commitment to offering students:

• Authentic tasks, with authentic products, associated with the production of knowledge supported by experts and/or specialist communities
• Exposure to, and feedback from a real audience (beyond the school)
• Meaningful use of contemporary technologies in achieving goals, rather than a focus on technological mastery for its own sake
• Fundamental and substantial interdisciplinary connections
• Multiple forms of student contributions allowing identification with the category ‘good student’ by diverse children

There is one final point to be made about KPS frameworks: whilst working on authentic tasks and receiving feedback is a key platform of the KPS framework this does NOT mean that students are expected to take on board the practices and dispositions of any particular field of endeavour without critically analysing them. To be more specific, students may well discover environments or workplaces with problematic or dangerous attitudes towards particular topics, activities or whole groups of people. Students can be exposed to attitudes of sexism, racism, homophobia and the like. Clearly, KPS projects and the teachers who pursue them, have a vital role to play in ensuring that just as students develop knowledge about tasks, and communities, they also develop their own knowledge about the production and reproduction of ideological
positions, and the ways in which they—as individuals and as a group—can contribute to naturalising particular views, particular options, particular political stances.

References


