



Future Education and Its Challenges: A Millennial's Perspective

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Abstract

In a rapidly changing world, school systems need to adapt themselves rapidly in order to be able to prepare their students for the upcoming challenges that are threatening the world today. If many steps have been taken by humanity towards progress, the multiple efforts needed to not stop this trend can be achieved only if human beings are taught differently from the past: soft skills must enter school programs more significantly, since only by nurturing empathetic and environmentally aware citizens who are able to think critically, will we be able to preserve democracy, improve social justice and international cooperation and save the world (and ourselves) from the threat of climate change.

1. Introduction

For a long time, education has been a unique tool through which human beings have been able to access all the knowledge and information they needed in order to interpret the world, reach awareness regarding themselves and their social environment and eventually achieve self-realization and well-being. School systems have always been institutions capable of setting the individual free (both internally and externally) by raising his capacities of acting according to his reflections—rather than on the dictates of others—and by helping him develop those skills and capabilities needed to confront the world and its challenges.

But confronting the world and its challenges is not enough anymore: school systems should work more on the students' capacity for imagining new, unexplored alternatives rather than teach them how to merely “survive” in a system that is constantly getting more complex and complicated. In this sense, education has a central role: students of today will be the leaders of tomorrow. School systems should then raise a **new kind of leader**, one that is able to inspire people and boost their individual and collective power to achieve their personal goals and build a more just society. Leaders are catalysts of change at all levels and in all dimensions; but the quality of leadership must improve so that the world can be led to a better future through mutual understanding, recognition and cooperation.

Education has also represented the propelling engine of progress in all fields, from communication to transportation to medical health care. But this progress has brought about many consequences—both good and bad—that are not always understood or taken under control by school systems, students and people in general. Rather, the consequences control

them and this is not acceptable anymore. Good consequences should be understood and reinforced; bad consequences should be understood as well and strongly limited. This can happen through education itself: humans can be taught to think critically about the world that surrounds them. We can teach them to correctly use the tools made available by human progress, maximizing their potential whilst avoiding unwanted and harmful consequences (i.e. social media and fake news).

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Living in a globalized world, global challenges are increasingly intensifying. Interdependence among states, international organizations and humans in general is a matter of fact. The ghosts of global threats to humanity’s survival are becoming more concrete and dangerous. In the context of globalization, interactions between all actors (from individuals to states and international organizations) have grown quantitatively, but not always qualitatively: people coming from very different countries and cultural environments encounter—and often collide—on a daily basis. An example above all: immigration. Immigration raises political debates which can lead to racist political decisions that can lead to hundreds of people dying. Hatred gets spread everyday everywhere in the world by political forces whose leaders take advantage of people’s weaknesses and fears. Education is the best antidote against these kinds of threats to human intelligence.

Many people are losing their capacities of understanding the world and its phenomena. Not because they are unintelligent, rather because they are uneducated. Populist and far right forces are rising and distorting people’s comprehension of social, political and economic problems by serving them extremely simplified visions of reality. Since these simplified and distorted visions see—at least most of the times—different cultures as incompatible realms, communication between different countries and cultural systems is then badly affected, which leads to the incapacity of the system to construct a stable base for a needed international cooperation.

Reality is what we think of it. Ideas shape the world. War is not an improbable event, if we think of it as a solution to problems. Anything can happen based on our ideas and actions. If we start to think of those who are different as enemies, they will eventually become our enemies and violence will occur.

Through education we shape the way humans think. That is why we need it in order to raise our chances to survive. But education needs to change. To be precise, education should become the driving force of a major shift in the way humans think of themselves and perceive others. By changing humans through education, we will give a great contribution to the efforts made to save the world and make it a better place for everyone. Education can boost the capacity of individuals to cooperate at all levels, causing positive effects both at the national and international level. Through education we can imagine and build more just societies and a more rightful and cooperative international system.

Through education, we can really change the world.

But we are running out of time. We need to change now.

2. Higher Education and the Individual: Needed Efforts Towards Self-understanding and Cooperation

Modern, liberal societies are mainly based on “negative freedom”: individual rights create a sphere that protects the individual from external impediments by detaching him from other human beings. Besides this, individual rights do not entail the capacity of individuals to actually be able to exercise them. Even social rights (thought and created in order to give people the actual tools to enjoy their individual rights) can fail in their attempt of setting the individual free. The mere application of negative freedom has led to atomized societies in which individualism has spread.

Often times, we do not understand that people coming from different social and cultural backgrounds may find it more difficult to enjoy the rights they are normally recognized for. A student coming from a low-income family and who needs to work full time in order to take care of himself will be more troubled in enjoying his right to study than a student who can rely on the financial support of his family. A girl who comes from a patriarchal family will find it more difficult to enjoy her right to study if her family members think she should marry a man and embrace her reproductive role rather than focus on her education.

School systems should recognize and counterbalance privilege, making it easier for troubled students to study so that they can twist their lives for the better. All students should be taught about privilege: understanding its consequences can reinforce the **empathetic system** of privileged people and attenuate the self-accusing behaviors of those students who do not make it not because of a lack of intelligence or effort, but because of the difficulties they experience in their social and cultural environment. Our accomplishments will never depend solely on our personal efforts: many other variables will contribute to our capacity of reaching our goals. Through education humans can be taught to take all these elements into consideration and to build a more just system that takes privilege into account and helps people towards self-realization.

Moreover, liberal societies and school systems often force individuals into standardized models of success: you are told that you can be happy only if your life satisfies certain standards. And you are taught to compete with your peers: either you succeed or they will. Either they fail or you will.* Basically, many times your success seems to depend on others’ failure. This way, humans tend to become some sort of almost identical robots competing against each other on who is more efficient. Productivity is the key word: the more productive you are, the more your chances of winning the game against the others increase. Life should never be a “all against all game”, but it becomes thus if we think of it this way. If we keep valuing the culture of individualism, no room for cooperation will be left. And without cooperation, everyone will lose the game in the end. It is just a matter of time.

* On this topic, check this interview with Tiziano Terzani, an Italian writer and journalist (with English subtitles): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRHJm8bvaAg>

Regarding how schools and universities work, students are usually taught and assessed the same way. Since the elementary school they are taught that their grades will define who they are and who they will become in life. Standardized tests are at the base of the assessment: but they should only be used as a diagnostic tool. They should support learning, not obstruct it (which is something they often do). When students believe they are defined by their grades, getting bad grades will affect their **self-esteem**, **self-respect** and **self-trust**. And someone who is affected in these areas of his self-understanding cannot be understood as an autonomous individual (Honneth and Anderson, 2005). He who is limited in his relations to the self cannot be considered a free person, no matter how many individual and social rights he is identified for. Those students who get bad grades because of troubled life conditions may eventually drop out thinking they are not intelligent enough though that is not the case. They may end up accepting a life that will not make them happy. They will stop using their imagination to think of potentially better alternatives for themselves and the people who surround them.

“Rather than teaching students to fit into certain social models and preparing them for jobs that may even disappear in a few years, universities and schools in general should learn to recognize individuality.”

It is clear that this kind of socio-cultural system not only leads to the spread of individualism (which affects solidarity and cooperation) but also to a huge waste of human capital (just think of all those brilliant people who were not able to find their place in universities due to their incapacity for finding and developing their real, latent capacities).

How to change this disheartening picture then?

School systems should start focusing on the individual person more: every human has a different background and needs to be understood rather than just assessed. By working on the individual, school systems would have more chances of strengthening—or restoring—one’s self-respect, self-esteem and self-trust sentiments, reinforcing one’s autonomy and contributing to the construction of a more just society in which everyone can actually enjoy their rights thanks to their good relations to the self.

But building a fair society lies also in the capacity of its people to show solidarity and grant equal opportunities to everybody. School systems can educate students in this sense, raising their capacities to cooperate and achieve social freedom, in two ways:

1. Students should be taught to stop trying to grade themselves according to standardized, stereotyped and socially constructed models that will not necessarily make them happy with what they do or have become. Trying to fit into social models that we do not feel as something we would actually aim to can cause stress and unhappiness. In the worst cases, we can even talk of completely wasted lives. Rather than teaching students to

fit into certain social models and preparing them for jobs that may even disappear in a few years, universities and schools in general should learn to recognize individuality—the distinct, unique characteristics of a person—and help students develop their personal skills in the best ways possible. Students have to be shown evidence about their uniqueness and must be encouraged to think independently, creatively and innovatively. Never

“Individualism will never change the world for the better: cooperation will.”

will you find a human being that is identical to another one. Diversity is a value that is being jeopardized by schools. The capacity of enhancing the personal skills and qualities of students—together with the stimulation of their critical and creative thinking—will result in a more just society in which every individual can contribute with their unique value to the enrichment of the world with a wide range of different ideas and solutions.

2. Human beings have never been lonely universes. We do not just live with other people: we strongly need them. Recognizing each other as humans—as people living very similar experiences that go beyond all the differences—is very important if we want to make the world a better place for everyone. A person should be taught that she can realize her desires by cooperating with other human beings: by helping each other, we can all reach our goals and create a fairer society, one that is built on solidarity and cooperation rather than individualism and competition. Universities should then teach the importance of social freedom, which is realized through mutual understanding, recognition and cooperation practices (Honneth, 2015). Individualism will never change the world for the better: cooperation will. Both negative and social freedom should be realized within society.

In the light of the above, we understand how school systems can become a driver for strong cultural shift, from individualism to cooperation. A shift that could lead to a society in which human potential can be released in all dimensions and fields and never wasted. A society founded on **equity** rather than equality: equality is treating everyone the same. Equity is about recognizing the individual differences (and weaknesses) and giving everyone what they need to be successful.

To build this kind of society it is crucial to focus on **soft skills**. Hard skills have always been the backbone of education systems. Knowledge is something we should never give up: the study of the globalization processes, economy, history, philosophy, physics etc.... is what gives the history of human progress in all fields and it is also what grants us the possibility to keep progress going on.

But what about soft skills then?

Some of the main soft skills students should be encouraged to develop are:

1. Communication Skills and Critical thinking
2. Creativity
3. Environmental awareness

3. Communication Skills and Critical Thinking

Communication is at the basis of the socialization process. But not always are we able to properly communicate with other individuals: cultural barriers, prejudices, political discord are some of the reasons that can lead us to misunderstandings that may unnecessarily complicate collaboration practices and even drive us to harmful, unnecessary conflicts.

If diversity is one of human beings' main characteristics, only by embracing it will we be able to get to a deeper understanding of humankind. Even within the same culture individuals can have completely different ways of seeing life and the world. Since they first enter the school system, students should be taught to listen actively to what others have to say and to establish a constructive dialogue towards mutual understanding and shared ideas and solutions.

On this point, I think it is necessary for students to have access to **cultural anthropology** courses: anthropology is probably one of the best subjects that show us the importance of **cultural relativism**. There is no hierarchy among cultures: only when we have given up all claims to cultural superiority we will be actually able to set a good base for valid, constructive cooperation both at the national and international levels.

Critical thinking is the ability to create logical connections between different arguments and to be able to develop an independent stream of ideas (N. G. Holmes, Carl E. Wieman and D. A. Bonn, 2015). This is one of the most needed skills humans must develop; to understand why a very modern example will be helpful: **social media and fake news**.

Social media networks (from Facebook to Twitter and Instagram) represent a double edged sword: they are both the most powerful communication tool of all times and a dangerous place in which we most of the times share our sensitive personal information. Our information can be collected and used for misleading intentions: everyday **fake news** is spread in the digital world with the clear intention of affecting our capacity to make decisions according to real information proved by clear evidence. Everyday hundreds of web pages are created and shared on social media accounts with the main intent of spreading unreal stories and news in order to manipulate public opinion and affect crucial political decisions that have huge consequences for everyone (i.e. Brexit).

But this must not be a reason to criticize social media: they can also be an unprecedented tool to share information and gather collective energies to address problems in a more effective way. When used correctly, Instagram can even become an educational tool as well. Through her Instagram profile Greta Thunberg has **educated** millions of people of all ages about climate change and channeled their energies into effective action. But Greta is only one of many examples. Many people using social media to educate are **culturally different**, just as many Instagram profiles through which minorities of all kinds concentrate their struggle for recognition fighting prejudice on a daily basis (as in the case of LGBTQI+ communities).

What we need to understand is that social media networks are not intrinsically evil or good: they just represent an amazing platform that can be used for evil or good intentions.

It should be our duty to understand their functioning more and help students develop all the right capacities to approach the digital realm in the most secure and useful way possible. Someone who has been educated to think critically will always be able to tell fake news from real ones. If more people in the UK knew how to think critically, maybe they would have not believed in fake news and Brexit would have not occurred. If more Italian people knew how to think critically, figures such as Salvini would probably not get that much political support.

The **transdisciplinary approach**, thought to unify knowledge, can also contribute in giving students the necessary tools to comprehend the complexity of the world and think critically in order to find creative solutions.

Education has then once again a very central role in shaping the future of humanity: through education we can neutralize disruptive, negative political forces, understand the world and its complex phenomena and change it for the better.

4. Creativity

Schools are preparing students to live in a world that does not exist anymore. Society, economy, politics, the international system, everything has drastically changed and will keep changing at an incredible speed. The more we keep teaching students like we have been doing during the last few decades, the more humanity will not be prepared for the challenges of the future: our own existence as humankind is at risk.

Most of the school systems in the world make the same mistake: they treat students like they were all the same person. They expect every student to go through the same activities, leaving little (or no) space for the development of their individuality. As we have already addressed above in this paper, the result is a homologated world where people struggle to find their voice.

I shall stress this concept one more time: diversity can be one of humanity's strongest tools. If we try to delete such a quality—creating standardized “robots”—we will not help ourselves. Every student should be free to know themselves, their qualities, what they really want to be and to do in life. This of course does not mean that we should let every student free to do whatever they want: school systems should find a way to look in depth at a student's personality and help him make the right choice.

A great way to help students develop their individuality is by letting them be creative: creativity (especially in Italy, the country I come from) does not have much space in schools. Subjects like **art**, **music**, **sports** and **painting** are considered not as worthy or fruitful as history, philosophy, mathematics etc. This is a big mistake: through creativity, students are let free to express themselves and to get in touch with their real self. And all of us know that finding our real self is what can truly help us in the pursuit of happiness (Donna L. Miller, 2015). Creativity not only helps students (and individuals in general) to find their real self: it also helps them to be confident about themselves and their diversity. By getting to know their unique qualities and their limits, they will learn not to judge other people (or themselves) just for being different. Creativity has positive effects not only on the well-being of a person who

becomes capable of getting in touch with their real self. Creativity gets people used to thinking **innovative, mind blowing ideas** that can actually change the world for the better (Irina Surkova, 2012).

Nowadays the world needs creative humans, especially **creative leaders** who are able to find innovative solutions and even predict future problems and build cooperative platforms with other leaders based on mutual understanding and recognition.

“Real progress should happen inside the human being, inside his mind.”

5. Environmental Awareness

Humans’ activities—especially during the last few centuries—have badly affected our planet and its natural equilibrium. As demonstrated by the scientific community at large, climate change is a real threat to our survival and to that of all the species living on the planet.

Raising students’ environmental awareness will eventually lead to a point in the future where leaders will be able to actually cooperate in finding solutions to this problem that is threatening us all with no absolute distinction.

But raising environmental awareness can have also an immediate result. The capitalistic market is one of the main causes of climate change. Everyday multinational firms work tirelessly to create needs for things that are not really essential to us. Our culture is mainly based on possessions: many times a human being is valued more on the basis of what he owns than for who he is. Money has become an end in itself, is not a tool anymore. The whole economic and financial system is mainly based on profit and many still believe in the narrative of continuous (economic) growth, ignoring (consciously or unconsciously) the fact that if we keep going this way we will end up blowing up together with our planet. But economy should be founded on humans’ actual needs rather than mere profit. The *Homo economicus* is a “species” that will condemn us all by seeking his personal profit no matter the social and environmental consequences of his actions. Do we really need SUVs? Is owning something as a mere status symbol a behavior we can consider acceptable, especially when it has bad consequences for the environment and all of us? (Honneth, 2015).

I do not want to answer this question now. What I want to underline here is that students should be taught to give importance to the essence of a person and not to their possessions. They should become aware of the direct and indirect social and environmental consequences of their actions—as consumers, for instance. Every individual is responsible and every individual makes a much bigger difference than one may think. Educating students to respect the environment means, once again, increasing our chances to survive and to imagine and build a better world.

6. Conclusions

School systems have always been—and should remain—one of the main drivers of change. Students do not need to learn how to adapt to the system: they need to learn how to look at it with a critical mind and how to imagine better alternatives.

Education systems must guide students towards a major cultural shift, from individualism to cooperation, from consumerism to environmentalism, from egoism to solidarity.

Our reality is multidimensional and easy answers have never existed. In the future, human beings will have to be able to dive into this complexity with no fear, always keeping a positive mind that is projected towards cooperation and new possibilities.

Finding the answers and the solutions to problems has never been easy and humankind has always done its best to make the most out of its understanding of reality.

But today, we must understand reality better. It is a matter of survival. It is a matter of creating a more just world, one in which every human being is granted access to happiness. Progress must not stop, but we must change our understanding of it: not only economical, not only technological. Real progress should happen inside the human being, inside his mind: that is where we create our own world. That is the very starting point from which we can achieve all these results.

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