Revisiting the near future of digital education: anticipation and acceleration

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Digital transformation

• What we missed
• Futures methods and anticipation
• Applying these methods to our most recent predicament
• Noting the institutional shifts that occurred in response to crisis: contested sites of transformation, sites of resistance
• Critiquing what these shifts laid bare as a result
Futures approaches

• Principle 1: educational futures work should aim to challenge assumptions rather than present definitive predictions
• Principle 2: the future is not determined by its technologies
• Principle 3: thinking about the future always involves values and politics
• Principle 4: education has a range of responsibilities that need to be reflected in any inquiry or visions of its future

Anticipation

• Anticipation is a perspective on the future which shifts away from prediction and forecasting, to a more critical mode which foregrounds agency, criticality and reflexivity in the face of the unknowable.

• Amsler and Facer (2017) describe anticipation studies as being ‘less concerned with the future as an object of study than [with] the emergence of new forms of time-consciousness and anticipatory practices which enable people to engage with ideas of the future as a resource to interrogate the…present’.
Near futures

• Near Future Teaching project (2017-2019)
• 'it becomes necessary for communities of scholarship to take on the task of articulating confident, alternative imaginaries for the future of teaching in universities which re-introduce the values we wish to teach and live by' (Bayne and Gallagher 2021 Forthcoming)

https://www.nearfutureteaching.ed.ac.uk/
1a: Community engagement

- ~400 students and staff (and schools)
- Opinions to themes to values
- Edtech and datafication as provocation

"The university should be a space for learning and un-learning."
(NFT Blog, BME Liberation Group)

"The risk of reducing every aspect of learning to a form of economic capital."
(NFT Blog, Blockchain)

"Is a future without failure a good future? What is the educational value of mistakes?"
(NFT Blog, NFT Think Tank: Vets)

"The opportunity to wonder about stuff... I think that if you lock that off too much you will be too deterministic."
(NFT Video, Values 2)

"We resist hierarchies that defer to credentials before and above the.

"For a university that is so diverse, I feel that there isn’t as appreciation for the actual diverse group of people who are together."
(NFT Blog, Values 2)

"Inherent biases and prejudice should be challenged through critical engagement with literature, which is diverse in race, gender, sexuality, ability."
(NFT Blog, BME Liberation Group)

"We resist precarious employment in all its forms - including short-term contracts, zero hour work and poverty wages."
(Edinburgh Futures Institute)

"One of my lecturers and I had a discussion about the content being quite difficult to discuss... pretty much everyone bar the four of us are very middle class."
(NFT Blog, Values 2)
1b: Articulated institutional values

Experience over assessment

Learning should not be over-assessed and instrumentalised.

Teaching should share a focus on employability and success with an understanding of the value of rich experience, creativity, curiosity and—sometimes—failure.

Relationships first

Relationships, dialogues and personal exchanges between students and staff build understanding in a way that is not possible via transmissive forms of teaching.

Teaching should be designed to provide the time and space for proper relationships and meaningful human exchange.

Participation and flexibility

The University community should cooperatively shape how—and what—it learns and teaches.

Flexibility for individuals, fluency across disciplines and cooperative responsibility for curricula should shape near future teaching.

Diversity and justice

Education should design-in meaningful diversity and real inclusion across all areas of activity.

All near future teaching should further social responsibility and global justice.
2: Future forecasting

• Distilling megatrend reports, horizon scanning documents, key trends barometers, policy documents and foresight analyses

• focused on aligning the analysis of key trends with the insights coming out of our work with the students and staff who constitute the university
## 2: Future forecasting

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3: Preferable and probable worlds

- Articulation of values in those worlds
- Preferable future amidst all the probable ones available to us
- Interrogating the present
Does any of this still matter?

Accelerated inequalities, accelerated divides, accelerated marginalisation. There are many that have been left behind, rendered invisible.

Increasingly commercial actors having say in how we teach, how we structure curricula, how we govern and accredit, how we frame the academic experience.

Imaginaries of seamless edtech consumption and data-driven decision making are framing institutional practice. Educational continuity in the wake of disruptions difficult to counter in its unassailability.

The unbundled university (potentially) accelerates in the wake of digital transformation. What aggregation of these unbundled parts proxy as institutional identity?
Does any of this still matter?

1. Sites of transformation and resistance matter
2. Institutional identities: values matter
3. Sector imaginaries: capturing the imagination of what digital transformation should be matters
4. Narratives of equity: how we use the digital matters
Transformation, resistance, and metastability

• an unending process of adjustment in the pursuit of equilibrium, a process historically shared structurally amongst larger “relatively fixed and self-correcting social structures” (Urry, 2016: 59)
• The capacity of systems to generate a metastability “cannot be reduced either to the actions of individual actors or to persisting social structures” (Urry, 2016: 59).
• Present and near futures emerging through sites of resistance and sites of transformation
Sites of transformation and resistance: assessment

- Surfaced assessment practices institutionally: reification and reimagining
- Provocation: remote invigilation: 'on top of the stress of taking a high-stakes exam (currently under extremely difficult conditions for many), students are surveilled in their own homes, by strangers and/or software, whose sole purpose is to catch them cheating.' (Fawns and Ross, 2020).
- Sympathetic grading
- Artefacts and actors: invigilation, institutional memory, inclusion, policy
Sites of transformation and resistance: relationships

- Routine narratives and burgeoning practices of 'contact'
- Emphasis on care, contact, and community and broadening discussions of how that is expressed in the digital
- Artefacts and mobilising actors: synchronous and asynchronous practices, supported technologies vs practices of individual staff, GDPR, student support, accessibility
Sites of transformation and resistance: participation

- Flexibility largely emphasized in school level responses and often phrased through the language of inclusion
- Considerable impact on synchronous and asynchronous practice
- Mobilising actor: internationalisation
Sites of transformation and resistance: diversity and justice

- Equity
- Visibility and invisibility: the marginalising realities of connectivity
- Tendency to cast gaze 'over there'
- Care and the performance of academic work
Where do we go from here?

1. Sites of inspiration and reimagining: learn from our colleagues
2. Note cascading complexity and impact on institutional futures
3. Persistent and participatory community-led R&D
4. Find a model that acknowledges the values of the institution
References