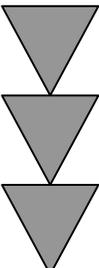


Developments in Education

GREAT EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21st
CENTURY



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MOTTO

*"The future now belongs to societies that organize themselves for learning."
Ray Marshall and Marc Tucker
(‘Thinking for a Living: Education and the Wealth of Nations’, 1992)*

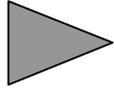
Abstract

We are the witnesses of a society in dynamic evolution on all plans. Education must be able to respond to, if not even to anticipate the radical transformations of the future emerging from the data of the present.

The paper comprises three main parts. First, a discussion of the mega trends of the contemporary period is brought to the fore. An array of opinions concerning its major educational objectives is critically presented. Then, major postmodernist views on education are discussed, emphasizing both elements of convergence and divergence. Finally, an attempt is made to anticipate the main development lines of the 21st century education.



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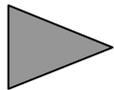


Introduction

The current period is characterized, globally and at the same time considering the components of the planetary macrosystem, by a dynamic evolution, in answer to both the pace of everyday life itself and the need to anticipate the organizational/managerial/process modifications.

Obviously, all the factors involved in the development of an education able to anticipate/react to the radical changes expected to occur in the future should contribute to an educational panorama including the various facets of change.

This article discusses the megatrends of the contemporary period, analyses postmodernist views on education and tries to anticipate the main development lines of the 21st century education.



Megatrends of the contemporary period – between anticipation and projection

The diachronic evolution of our epoch is characterized, globally, but also considering the various individual components of the social, political, economic and cultural macrosystem, by the complex dynamics of change, meant to answer the highly accelerated, even effervescent, pace of the daily life, and the requirements for the anticipation of as well as by permanent readjustment and adaptation to the changes taking place in the organizational and managerial fields, aiming at new goals, specific to our time.

The implications of acknowledging, and necessarily accepting this situation - as concerns the increase in responsibility of all those contributing to the progressive development of a type of education able to respond to, if not even to anticipate the radical transformations emerging from deep and continuous mutations in the present - are conducive to the existence, within the current educational arena, of a range of approaches to the change.

However, it is quite obvious that, whether we discuss the change as innovation, by substitution or restructuring at a macro-educational level of the existing structures (Huberman, 1978: 12), or we talk about the subtle and often difficult to induce – at the level of all the involved actors – transmutations in the micro-educational sphere, the goal of all these actions, recurrent by its very nature, is the optimization of education.

Certainly, the literature provides a variety of different angles to this major objective of the contemporary period. Special attention has been given to Brock's statements (1993: 3-4), which have the power to generalize, to achieve a synthesis, carried out in a lucid and vigorous manner, of the essential lines regarding the imperatives and the major objectives of the change which should be implemented at the tertiary education level in the United States. The author underlines that, although there is 'no single formula for change common to all', the unifying elements of the directions of change should aim primarily at:

- taking values seriously;
- putting student learning first;
- creating a nation of learners.

With a view to attaining these objectives, Brock's *American Imperative Chairman's Preface* (1993) shows that, in order to fulfil such goals, education must turn into a consistent and coherent system, able to produce and support this nation of learners which is being formed, by ensuring their access to educational services 'as they need them, when they need them, and wherever they need them.'

In the Romanian literature in the field of education sciences, Cerghit (1997: 27) also emphasizes the complexity of the requirements to be met by a person living in our contemporary world. Such a person is required to have a well-founded and justified power of decision, the ability to prospect into the future and foresee one's professional efforts in an integrated vision, as well as with a courageous and enthusiastic involvement. This can be conducive to a new type of personality, whose profile places the issues connected with education within a new matrix of values, focused on active and formative elements.

While intentionally eluding a possible debate on the degree of justness or objectivity of the predictive-anticipative statements of certain well-known futurologists such as Naisbitt, some useful elements for the endeavour of outlining the previsions made two decades ago about a future which has turned to be our

present should be retained here. Evidently, substantial reshaping is mandatory, particularly for our educational system, in a country still feeling its specific ways towards an appropriate market oriented economy, able to provide modern jobs, open to global competition. It is necessary to generalize a type of better educated, more adaptable work force, oriented towards collaborative approaches and prepared to assume their professional itinerary, but also their personal, human one, by continuing to learn.

Some of the interesting directions of the predicted evolution of education are synthetically presented below. I have summed them up as they already appeared in Naisbitt's first work, published twenty years before the threshold of the third millennium (see Table 1 – columns 1 and 2), while in a third column those aspects have been added, be they unnoticeable or recurrent, which Naisbitt and Aburdene emphasized in their book published one decade later (1990), as representing goals still to be fulfilled in education in a globalized area worldwide, dominated by Internet and information technology, which has become notoriously characterized by McLuhan's metaphor of the 'global village' (1968).

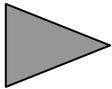
Educational realities in the last quarter of the 20th century	Suggested lines of reform	The 1990s –perspectives revisited, new foci
Short-term perspective	Long-term perspective	The necessity to prepare enough superqualified workforce to cope with the informational type economy
Centralization	Decentralization ; autonomy	Focus on career readjustment and increase of already qualified workforce at tertiary level
Institutionalized support	Self-support	Carrying out of a positive relationship between the optimization of education and global competition
Hierarchies; exclusive options	Alternative options	Stress on the managerial and leadership directions in the high tech era education
Representative democracy	Participative democracy	The increase in importance of the study of humanities (an important role of proficiency in English)

Table 1 Main trends of interest for the educational domain – two levels of anticipation

The discussion of the relationship between anticipative and predictive elements can be concluded by underlining the fact that at present knowledge, seen as the acquired information and skills by a person, has become one of the major resources for the survival of society. The *knowledge economy* has emerged and is developing, and it affects by ripple effects much more people than those directly involved in it.

There are many authors who have mentioned an interesting fact of life, typical for our times: 90% of all scientists who have ever existed on the planet are alive and active at present. Therefore, one of the most precious values of today's society is represented by what is called *know-how* – the product of the most precious material of the 21st century – human intelligence.

The continuous centring upon innovation and efficiency in all the component branches of society leads towards a much enhanced priority attached to learning. The pace of generating, developing and renewing knowledge is so quick that, after only 2 years since their appearance on the market, 90% of products become outdated and then disappear, being replaced by others, incorporating new efforts to know, innovate and create. Today we have got the possibility of acquiring, processing and communicating knowledge in ways inconceivable to the previous generations. All this has given birth to the concept of *lifelong learning*, thus sketching a new scene of the field of learning, with areas still waiting for full decryption.



Postmodernism – emphasis on the educational field

As Klages remarks on-line (2003), together with many other scientists endeavouring to define, at least partially, the hard core of the concept, *postmodernism* is a complex, difficult to analyze term, a set of ideas which have emerged on the arena of academic studies since the mid-1980s. It is a construct which appears in a wide range of study fields and it is difficult to localize as far as its starting point is concerned, both temporally and historically.

Mizrach (2000, on-line) underlines another aspect, apparently terminological, but also concerning the very substance of the term (which has been used to such a large extent by so many contemporary thinkers in various fields that the abbreviation

'*pomo*' could become an acceptable formula when we refer to it!), viz. he draws our attention to the fact that the movement is not actually called 'antimodernism', as it is not an *in toto* rejection of the kind of modernity it has emerged from, but, rather, 'an effort to combine the best of the modern world with the best elements of the traditions of the past, in an organic way that eliminates the worst parts of both'.

The bivalent relationship between modernity and postmodernity – 'continuity and rupture' – is extremely pertinently analyzed by Paun (2002: 27), who refers first and foremost to the 'obvious discrepancy between the educational practice – mostly dominated by the paradigm of modernity – and the theoretical analyses and research developments carried out from the postmodern perspective'.

The ways and manners postmodernism is related to modernism are quite various, in terms of standpoints and foci. Thus, for Burke (2000, on-line), modernity would represent:

- intellectually ... the power of reason over ignorance;
- the power of order over disorder; and
- the power of science over superstition,

with the new, postmodern era being characterized by a rejection of absolute truths. It has brought to the surface a multitude of different perspectives on society and an appreciation of different cultures. It has highlighted globalization on the one hand, and localization on the other, the celebration of difference and the search for commonality.

As regards the educational practices, Păun (op.cit.: 29) lists the major characteristics of the modern paradigm as follows:

1. the stress on and valorisation in excess of the informative function, that of instructing, as compared to the formative-educational function;
2. the feature of reducing substantially the sphere of information resources in school, by considering the teacher as the only valuable, genuine source of knowledge;
3. the focus on the instrumental dimension of the educational process: objectives, didactic design, teaching and learning techniques chosen exclusively by criteria of efficiency, rationalization and ritualizing of the didactic act and of the lesson itself.

The postmodern paradigm, which is still being formed proposes existential and humanistic paths, by the 're-evaluation of the subjective dimension of the educational act', thus creating that specific educational space which, by re-establishing the dialogue between the subjective and the objective elements, between the individual and the society, could introduce a 'global, comprehensive and integrative perspective regarding the individual', postulated as the fundamental dimension of the education aims.

There are slightly different views, certainly. Thus, for Klages (op.cit.), postmodernism is fundamentally concerned with questions of the *organization of knowledge*. Whatever in an epoch undergoing the process of losing vigour - the modern one - used to mean in terms of final aims of education for an individual: *knowledge for the sake of knowledge*, with a view only to becoming a cultivated, well informed person becomes, in a postmodern society, knowledge of the *functional* type – one learns not in order to possess that knowledge, but in order to *make full use* of it. Consequently, nowadays the educational policy puts emphasis, as the author maintains, on 'skills and training, rather than on a vague humanistic ideal of education in general', adding that we deal, in postmodern societies, with 'digitizable' knowledge, which cannot exist and therefore be distributed, stocked or rearranged differently but in ways involving the use of current computer electronic technologies.

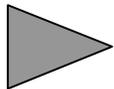
There are points where the two polarizing visions can be reconciled in the works of a range of authors who try to refine their views. We are interested in their opinions here mainly in order to better understand the directions of postmodern development in the educational field. Thus, Giroux (1997), analyzing some of the central assertions defining the modernist and postmodernist discourses, also considering the implications of feminist postmodernism, sums up their significance for educators. He does not oppose them drastically, but, on the contrary, he tries to determine where and how they converge. It is stated that, for the intersection points of the three paradigmatic lines, pedagogy provides educators with the opportunity to develop a project encompassing human interests which pass beyond the local interest policies border, referring to class, ethnicity, race or gender.

Within the same value-generating context, Mizrach (op. cit.), quoting Marilyn Ferguson, considers that a key idea of the postmodern type is the *reconceptualization of vocation*, seen less and less as 'a label and a trap', and more

and more as ‘a growth experience, by increasing the flexibility, diversity, and autonomy of work’.

Giroux (op.cit.) concludes by showing that, alongside a few other factors in the cultural domain, educators can rethink a form of new democracy, understood in principle as a struggle in the realm of values, practices, social relationships and human subject positions, meant to lead to the increase of the assertion grounds of the capabilities and possibilities of individuals, functioning as a basis created in view of a social order which should include a component characterized by understanding, empathy and human compassion.

To sum up, as Kumar puts it (1997), in postmodernism, ‘*identity* is not unitary or essential, it is fluid or shifting, fed by multiple sources and taking multiple forms’; each of us is unique, bearing our own distinctive elements, but we also share a lot of them. Becoming aware of this is essential for educators and learners.



Trends in education at the beginning of the 21st century

In Paun’s quoted study on the educational-humanistic paradigm within the context of postmodernity a formula can be found, having the value of an inspired quintessence, concerning the trend of future developments in terms of attitudes and paths of the main actors in the field of education. Thus, the learners will have to take over their own education, using their creative energies in learning situations, while the educator should assume the role of *facilitator* of the evolution of those who are being educated.

The current period can be characterized by what Donald Schön (2001, on-line) would call ‘the loss of the stable state’, covering the level of the education organizations still at the previous stage in the phase of ‘dynamic conservatism’. This denotes the tendency *to fight in order to remain the same*. The loss of the stable state actually means that our society, by its institutions, is in a continuous process of transformation and that we cannot expect that along our lifetime we could see new stable states being introduced.

It is compulsory therefore that we should learn how to understand and administer these changes *flexibly* and in a manner adequate to our concrete contexts, by developing our capacity of assuming them at both institutional and personal levels. In other words, we should become '*adepts at learning*', able not only to transform the existing structures into the desired ways, but also to develop an educational framework comparable to a '*learning system*', able to carry out its own continuous transformation. In postmodernism, the direction which is claimed from the individual, institutional and societal levels by the loss of the stable state is that of '*learning about learning*'.

In this respect, an analysis of the overwhelming majority of the documents on educational policies maintained online by important universities or by the governments of developed countries shows a convergence towards the concern for reconstructing their directions to follow in the educational practice. Here are some of the trends we are recurrently and articulately reminded about:

- Maximising the breadth of the learning experience, for example by supporting a range of different learning styles, and, where appropriate to the aims and learning outcomes of courses, by providing innovative multi-and/or inter-disciplinary courses; facilitating and motivating members of academic staff to develop teaching and assessment methods which support autonomous learning, and which in turn encourage students to make the most of the opportunities presented to them: for example through staff development, educational research, the dissemination of good practice and through the appropriate use of information and communication technologies - University of Bradford, ACADEMIC POLICY COMMITTEE, (1998, on-line).
- The '*Launch of Lifelong Learning Strategy*', in the « Scottish Executive » paper, issued by the Government of Scotland (2003, on-line), admits the 'crucially important role that learning plays in the future economic prosperity of the country'. The document establishes a clear agenda with a view to creating new learning opportunities meant to stimulate the 'demand for learning' at national level. In that context learning is seen as an opportunity throughout the entire life, and also as a lifetime achievement, not only in order to have access to careers which previously could have been inaccessible, but also in order to foster new life-enriching interests.

- Komives (2004: 37), referring to the changes occurring in the nature of the activity specific to American tertiary education, adds to the idea of its 'moving toward a more adaptable work force' the remark that 'the rapid pace of change, the expansion of knowledge, and the increasing demands for technological competence create a press for enhanced work force adaptability'. She strongly emphasizes a more focused orientation towards 'student learning, the teaching-learning process, and creating learning climates'.
- Magolda and Terenzini, (2004, on-line), who devote a vast study to the trends in learning and teaching in this century, make special mention of the '*educational tailoring*', i.e. the diversification of the forms of conceiving education in relation to the concrete contextual factors. This involves admitting the fact that, on the one hand, learning is holistic, well-connected to the lives of the students, and characterized by multiple types of intelligences and modalities of acceding to knowledge; on the other hand, it requires new viewpoints in the pedagogical activity, teaching being integrated with learning in an interactive and collaborative manner, and sustained by the process of continuous formation of the educator through reflection and action, no longer characterized by the traditional "I-pitch-you-catch" approach. Similarly, continuous evaluation is increasingly seen as an integral part of the teaching-learning process and as a mechanism of ensuring the necessary feedback for both teachers and learners.

As far as the directions to be taken in the policy of modern languages teaching-learning-evaluating, the specialized European organization (2004, on-line) recommends as a main objective 'to promote methods of *modern* language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility'.

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