Chronicle of Higher Ed 25 March 1974

Alvin Toffler and his futurologist friends

By Robert McClintock

Learning for Tomorrow, edited by Alvin Toffler. Random House, 421 pages, $10.

MUCH in *Learning for Tomorrow* is an embarrassment. Alvin Toffler observes that some contributors will not use "His-tory" out of respect for women's rights. Nell Eurich remarks on "Plato's *New Republic*"—such updating of the classics being *de rigueur* in this very with-it work. Philip Werdell condenses the history of higher education into two pages of astounding errors and distortions.

Clichés abound in the book. Toffler speaks solicitously of the need to "help orient the individual in the midst of hurricaning change," and others worry over "the restlessness of our technological society as it races into the future."

Jargon is plentiful, too. Benjamin D. Singer contributes the most impressive phrase, "the future-focused role-image," which other contributors pick up and overwork. To enhance its inherent concision, they often reduce it to the acronym FFRI, which might sound good to German libertarians, but FFRI lacks the pleasing alliteration of the full phrase.

Singer defines the future-focused role-image as "our self-image projected into the future," a close equivalent to "ambition," a word which is presumably obsolete in Singer's lexicon. But if Singer had used the "oldspeak" of plain English, he might have found that he had simply reiterated in his essay the commonplaces of the WASP tradition that he thinks he decries.

Education At Its Best

Enough for embarrassments, however. In the best essay of the book, Irving H. Buchen stipulates that one should "discuss education at its best, so that any failures are fundamental to the process rather than to our inability to realize it fully."

At their best, the writers in *Learning for Tomorrow* contend that educators have traditionally paid excessive attention to the past and too little to the future. Owing to this bias, educators have failed to elicit the proper aspirations in the young, especially in those who are poor, black, or female. With the development of futurology and other systematic efforts at the study of the future, it has become possible to recast the curriculum from kindergarten through graduate school to imbue all learning with explicit reference to the future. Such changes will increase the value of education to students and society alike; the changes will revitalize our educational institutions; they will bridge the gap between fact and value; they will move both school and society to humane reform.

Toffler and his colleagues aim to initiate a major movement in education. In *Future Shock*, Toffler asserted as one of his strategies for survival that "education must shift into the future tense." The shift, sketched in that book, is worked out in much greater detail in *Learning for Tomorrow*. Readers are called to board the bandwagon: "The introduction of future consciousness into education is the next wave of educational change . . . , but it has deep connections with the political and educational reform movements of the '60's."

Contributors solicit the commitment of diverse constituencies to futurist education. Several enthusiastically tout futurized curricular programs and provide potential recruits with extensive information on who the futurist innovators are and on how their innovations may be emulated.

The book even displays signs of an incipient cult of personality, for several of the contributors refer to Toffler with remarkable reverence. In short, as a result of being written to attract partisans, the text often smacks of mindless enthusiasm, of boosterism for futurism, of overclaim for future shock.

Rhetoric of Innovation

Despite some good essays, such as those by Alvin F. Poussaint, Dennis Livingston, and Buchen, *Learning for Tomorrow* merits severe criticism. But in criticizing it, one risks confirming in the minds of the authors certain prophecies made in the book.

Over and over again the writers clothe their ideas in the rhetoric of embattled innovation; they anticipate that the minions of the *status quo*, fearing the future, will resist reform. But in criticizing their program, one need not be against explicit concern for the future in education. Rather, serious study of the future has developed sufficiently that one should start to draw distinctions: to object to sloppy thinking by some practitioners of futurology is not to reject out-of-hand all study of the future. Quite the contrary, *Learning for Tomorrow* merits criticism for the sake of the future, for Toffller and his followers conceive of the future in a limited, one-sided way.

Toffler's perception of the future is limited by the liberal optimism characteristic of Americans. As a result, *Learning for Tomorrow* is a "can do" book about a "can do" education. As if by plan, different authors repeatedly resort to the same formula in indicating how the future should be dealt with in the curriculum: "Taken together, these new styles of learning must prepare students for imagining possible futures, for predicting probable futures, and for deciding about preferable futures."

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A Wild Unknown

Throughout, the concern for the future runs one-sidedly from the possible to the probable to the preferable. But life is not so kind. Each person will experience things that he anticipated as neither probable nor preferable, perhaps not even as possible. For each, the real future includes the undesirable, the improbable, the seemingly impossible; even with futurology, the future is in large part a wild unknown. By purveying a tamed image of the future, Toffler and his collaborators nurture a shallow ebullience and a complacent over-estimation of human power.

In the past, the great views of how the future enters into education have faced the final future, death. Socrates, Cicero, Erasmus, and Montaigne, among others, agreed that to live well one should learn to die with dignity. In *Learning for Tomorrow* the only significant mention of death is by Toffler, who remarks with some malaise that when students anticipate their futures, "death, despite cryogenics and research into aging, is still regarded as a high-certainty event." And rightly so, despite cryogenics and research into aging. Each faces the deaths of those he loves; his own death; the wretched facts of famine, war, and misery; the immediacy of accidents that rend flesh with unprecedented force; the potentiality of manifold catastrophes.

To learn for tomorrow one should learn to endure without despair when endure one must. Yet *Learning for Tomorrow* is mute about the darker possibilities. In it, the authors say nothing about tragedy, even though reflection on tragedy has been our best means for facing the forbidding side of the future, for seeing what dignity remains when actuality overwhelms expectation. Compared to Toffler's enthusiasm for future studies, our religous, philosophic, and literary heritage speaks much more fully to a future at once wonderful and terrible.

The Value of Things Past

That things past have a value for the future will seem paradoxical to the authors of *Learning for Tomorrow*. Over and over again they reiterate that educators have traditionally failed to pay sufficient attention to the future because they have been obsessed by the past. As Toffler proclaims, "*all* the contributors agree that today's schools and universities are too past- and present-bound. Thus, from its first

chapter to its last, the book stands as a manifesto for those who wish to see the future introduced into education." Had Toffler and his friends risked more intimate contact with the hoary enemy, educational tradition, they might have realized the falsity of their claim and developed more sophistication in advancing their position.

Western educational theory has been a long running argument about how best to account for the future in efforts to educate. One side originated with the Greek sophists who held that educators should first anticipate the future as best they could by consulting tradition and intelligent foresight and then prepare the young for success in that anticipated future. The authors of *Learning for Tomorrow* belong on this side of the argument; they share with Protagoras and many, many after him the faith that the future is more or less knowable, that the general features of life tomorrow can be limned by those who learn the right techniques, that a program of learning *for tomorrow* can therefore be devised.

Michael A. M McDaniel states the intention well: "As Toffler points out, and as few familiar with education will deny, parents expect the schools to 'fit their children for life in the future.' This expectation, if taken seriously, as it should be,

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turns out to be at least a partial solution to the difficulty posed by 'overchoice' in the curriculum—we must design a curriculum that *will*, in fact, fit children for life in the future."

On the other side of the long debate, a quite different conception of the future has given rise to a quite different aim for education.

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contingency the wise man pursued the universal, that which would have value under all conditions.

Pursuit of Universals

In pedagogical practice this pursuit of universals has put a premium on the mastery of principles. To learn to read with rigor, to write with power, to calculate with comprehension, to judge with prudence, to do all under all possible conditions: these have been the aims of a universal education. These aims have been justified, not by reference to the past, by obeisance to tradition, but by reference to the future, by recognition of the contingency inherent in every expectation.

In *Learning for Tomorrow*, the authors advance too easy a view of education, especially in their discussions of higher education. Future studies are offered as a panacea. Too little is said about the hard work of education that can only be performed by each student and each teacher in unsung labor in classroom after classroom. Far too much is said about the saving power of certain subject matter, the possession of which is superstitiously believed to fit one for the future. Concern for the universal is weak, and consequently the program put forward has only a deceptive, contingent value for tomorrow.

An education of true value tomorrow can be won through all possible content, by time reference, from paleontology to futurology. The value tomorrow will depend not on the content studied, but on the quality of the study. The value tomorrow of any subject will depend on whether, in acquiring it, one developed humanity a sense of the awesome contingency and dogged perdurability of life, and one mastered skill, a combined capacity for an informed choice of goals and a comprehending use of techniques for pursuing them. To be sure, in laboring on future studies the young can develop humanity and skill, but their way to acquiring those qualities is not charted in *Learning for Tomorrow*.

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