Shrinking Futures and the Challenge for Democratic Education

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Our presentation is titled "The Challenge of Shrinking Futures for Democratic Education." And we mean this quite literally: the range of futures that young people, educators and policymakers are able to imagine and to act toward is, we argue, actually getting narrower. This process of shrinking futures is the result of a dynamic that is in part enforced by the very institutions charged with actually expanding futures.
That's what we want to explore today. We'll develop a diagnosis, then offer what we think is a productive conceptual response.

We'd like to begin with these images.
What you see here are cards from an educational game called *Escape Fake*. Each card describes a near-future scenario — and because the text is rather small, I'd like to read them for you:
"Post-EU Era: In the aftermath of the European Union, countries across the world are fighting hybrid wars."
"Brave New Country: In this multiple-class system, individuals are constantly tracked and immigrants have a low socioeconomic status."
"Malice in Wonderland: Totalitarian regimes have been installed based on election hacking and advanced machine learning, shaping how voters behave and what they believe."
"Metaverse Escapism: Climate change skepticism has created irreversible ecosystem changes. Many prefer to spend their life entirely in the digital world."
There are more cards to the game, but the direction is always the same. What interests us here is the register they share: each scenario presents the future as something whose trajectory we can already recognize — something to be survived, adapted to, or escaped from. Young people are invited to engage with futures that have already been decided, in this case: for the worse. The implicit message is: prepare for the worst.
That is a remarkably narrow imaginative horizon. And it is, we argue, symptomatic of something broader.

A brief look at the current discourse reveals: contemporary western societies are dominated by two broad future narratives. On one side, there is *techno-solutionism*: the faith that innovation – and today that means: Digitalization and AI – will solve our crises. The current version of this is the recent hype around AGI, Artificial *General* Intelligence. (Which seems to have always been right around the corner, for like the past 70 years.) On the other side, there is the dystopian collapse narrative: ecological catastrophe, social disintegration, democratic breakdown.

At first glance, these look like opposites. But they have something important in common: both systematically marginalize collective action and shared agency. In one, the future is managed by algorithms and tech ecosystems. In the other, it is simply too late. The subjective result is what many of our students actually express: "To do something about the state of the world, that's not really my job," "it's way too late to do anything anyway," "that's not for me to decide." These statements reflect the state in which our society as a whole currently finds itself.

In both scenarios, the future is already decided – for supposedly better or for worse. What shrinks, is the sense that the future is still something we might collectively be able to shape.
The science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson called this situation "futurecide" – the killing off of possible futures. More broadly, Max Haiven and others, scholars and activists alike, speak of a "crisis of imagination." [Here is a brief overview of the discussion in headlines.] We find that term productive, because it shifts attention from the question of what the future will *be* to the question of what capacities we have for *imagining* it, and imagining it otherwise. If technology will solve everything, there is nothing left to imagine. If collapse is inevitable, imagination feels futile. What shrinks, in both cases, is the shared capacity to envision futures that are neither given nor foreclosed. That is the educational problem we are addressing.

So we have the diagnosis, but how did this happen? We argue that there are systemic mechanisms at work, in western societies as a whole and in education specifically. Adams, Murphy, and Clarke introduced the concept of the "anticipatory regime" to describe a modern way of feeling and living toward the future – governed by the injunction to characterize and inhabit degrees of uncertainty, adjusting ourselves to routinized likelihoods and probable outcomes. In their words, anticipatory modes enable the production of possible futures that are "lived and felt as inevitable in the present." The future feels like something already arriving that we need to prepare for.
Amsler and Facer have applied this concept to education policy and their analysis is, we think, quite compelling. Education policy under the anticipatory regime frames the future as something to be anticipated and adapted to. Students are positioned as investors in their own human capital, trained to optimize their learning for predefined outcomes. What we want to highlight from their paper is this particular passage, which they identify as the central educational consequence of anticipatory regimes: *the epistemological and practical foreclosure* of spaces to imagine a *range* of possible futures with and for children, teachers, schools and systems of organized learning as a whole. The phrase "foreclosure of spaces" is precise. It is not that imagination is forbidden, but, to quote Hanna Thomas Uose, "our collective imaginative energy has been directed toward reinforcing a status quo that continues to create climate change, conflict, inequity and human rights violations." Students learn, through the fabric of contemporary schooling, that futures are outcomes to be managed, not horizons to be shaped. Thus, the role of students as what they call "worldmakers" is systemically marginalized.

AI is embedded in this anticipatory regime and amplifies some of its dynamics. We already talked about those narratives that position AI as the key to solving educational and societal crises. But as Neil Selwyn has argued in his work, AI in education naturalizes goals that are in fact subject to democratic negotiation. The techno-solutionist question is not "What is education for?" but rather "How can we optimize education in ways machines can understand?" That change of direction sidelines the political and ethical dimensions of education entirely.
Furthermore, Selwyn points out correctly: who gets to set up AI systems in education is a crucial question of power. Because AI is not a way of representing the world but an intervention that helps to produce the world it claims to represent. Setting it up one way or another changes what becomes naturalized and what becomes problematized. The future of AI and education, he insists, is not a foregone conclusion we as educators and scholars alike simply need to adapt to. There is an urgent need for more human-centered, open source AI-Technology, but these are merely on the horizon.
For societies more broadly, the effects are threefold: acceleration processes that Rosa analyzed compress time for deliberation; individualization dissolves the collective subject that democracy requires; and algorithmic discrimination reproduces and deepens existing inequalities. These are constitutive features of the current developments.

Let me briefly bring in some empirical grounding. Studies of young people's orientations to the future consistently find what we might call an "optimism paradox": young people tend to be optimistic about their own lives and futures, but deeply pessimistic about collective or societal futures. They imagine being personally fine while the world falls apart around them.
This is not simply irrationality or cognitive dissonance. It is the result of what scholars describe as a neoliberal individualization of hope. The future is thought of as a personal crisis to be managed or a personal gain to be won, but not as a shared horizon. What these findings indicate is that young people struggle to imagine futures as something held in common.

This brings us to our main point. We argue that shrinking futures are a significant challenge for democratic education. Let me be specific about the three mechanisms we identify.
First, techno-solutionism encourages visions of programmable citizens – people whose actions can be optimized, predicted, and nudged rather than subjects who deliberate and decide. Second, crisis framings risk shifting the normative horizon of politics in general from freedom and equality toward bare survival, making the curtailment of rights easier to justify. When the question becomes "how do we get through this?" the space for democratic contestation contracts. Third, as we already stated before, anticipatory regimes steer students toward adaptation to fixed outcomes, producing a pervasive feeling of powerlessness.

The central question, then, is: How can we contest shrinking futures? What would it mean to take that diagnosis seriously in educational practice?

Our argument is that democratic education must reclaim future-making as a collective, open-ended practice. This requires creating space for uncertainty, ambivalence, and plurality – not optimization. The shift is from asking "what will the future be?" – a question that positions us as passive recipients – to asking "what futures do we want to pursue together as worth living in and fighting for?" That is a question that positions us as individuals and collectives with agency.
Facer offers a formulation that we find helpful here: what are the educational practices that enable young people and communities to contest the visions of the future that they are being presented with? And how do we fight for viable futures for all? That "fight for viable futures for all" is precisely what we have in our minds as well. The question for us, then, is where and how the capacities we need for that can actually be exercised.

This is where we introduce our framing concept artistic citizenship as it is discussed in the volumes of Campbell and Martin and also Elliott, Silverman and Bowman. In the context of artistic citizenship, aesthetic and artistic practice is understood as ethically charged, socially situated action. Artists are agents for the common good, not because of any explicit moral agenda, but because artistic practice is by its very nature a social, cooperative, and ethically guided mode of action. But artistic citizenship is not only intended for professional artists, as hierarchies between artists and non-artists are not adopted here, but is open to everyone as a way of thinking and doing.
The key move we make is to understand imagination in that context not as a private, individual, mental capacity – something you either have or don't – but as a social, collective, learnable skill. That is: a literacy. Imagination literacy, in this sense, is the practiced ability to articulate, and share visions of futures that are different from the present – including futures that are currently marginalized, silenced, or rendered implausible by dominant discourses.
Arts education, understood in this sense, fosters the imagination of different, plural, marginalized futures as democratic practice. The arts create what we might call temporary publics: spaces in which participants can engage with uncertainty and ambivalence without the pressure of immediate feasibility. You can inhabit a future without having to defend it as policy. That is the specific contribution of artistic practice to democratic education.

We won't go into full detail here, but our workshop format "Dear Future" puts these principles into practice. We offer guided time-travel sessions, we invite participants to draw and write postcards to the future and address them to their future selves or others. We invite participants to share their future imaginations with the plenary, so that the participants have a safer space to imagine scenarios, inhabit them, speak from within them. We also can take a step back afterwards and reflect on whose futures get

imagined, and why. The format deliberately creates distance from the imperative to be "realistic" and invites instead speculative, affective, and collective engagement with futurity. *We had originally planned to contribute to this conference with our workshop, but the conference organizers imagined this to be off-limits, so we are now merely discussing it.*

So we'd like to close with our central claim. The main challenge for democratic education in the present moment is not technological, but imaginative. The question is not how to equip students for a future that experts have already talked into existence. The question is how to foster potentials to reinvent futures as ever-changing outcomes of collective ethical practice.

We want to leave you with this post by just-shower-thoughts, which we often use to close our workshops, because it captures something that theory sometimes misses. "When people talk about travelling to the past, they worry about radically changing the present by doing something small. But barely anyone in the present really thinks they can radically change the future by doing something small." That asymmetry is the problem we are trying to address. Democratic education, at its best, is the practice of teaching young people – and ourselves – that small things done together in the present do actually change the future. And that the future is, in the most serious sense, ours to make.
Thank you.