Thrive:

Schools Re-Invented for the Real Challenges We Face

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Today, education has to be about learning to thrive in a transforming world.
When we examine what it means to thrive, we see that thriving must happen at four interdependent levels, none of which can be ignored:

- global – our place in the planet;
- societal – place, communities, economies;
- interpersonal – our relationships;
- intrapersonal – the self.

Education continues with the old prospectus: the promise of 'succeeding' (gaining better competitive access to the shrinking pool of good jobs) if the right knowledge and skills are acquired. Most writing about the 'future of education' ends up with lists – of what students need to learn in order to 'succeed' in the future. These get shoehorned in as new outcomes under old efficiency-oriented models of education.
Thrive shifts the focus to what children and young people need to be allowed to experience and do now as part of their experience of school – not to develop a set of abstract skills, but to learn to live in new and better ways, taking charge of the future so they can shape it and deal with its challenges. Thinking about the future and how the world has already changed, and will change exponentially faster, should direct us towards new purposes for education. Some of these new purposes will be collective, rather than just individual or national.

Why we have to ask 'Why?'

Our current education system, which emerged in the middle of the 19th century and was designed to serve the needs of the Industrial Revolution, is under intense strain. This is true of most services in which the state plays a key role in providing. In the case of education, the pressure is now acute. There is an increasing perception that the mass education system is failing the public. This perception has given rise to a rash of 'school reform' movements across the world.

The school reform movements are diverse.
At one extreme is the view that the existing model of schooling is essentially sound, but can be enhanced by a mix of better trained teachers and greater use of technology; basically, this view argues that 'school improvement' needs to be done better.

At the other end of the continuum is the view that 'schooling' needs to be disrupted entirely, and that technology in the hands of learners will render schools obsolete. This view believes that 'Schooling' is close to being over (and, possibly, the sooner the better), and that learning will be disintermediated, just as many industries already have been.

Between these two viewpoints is the view that schooling needs to be re-designed, re-imagined. A new paradigm is needed and is overdue: but this book argues that schools as community institutions have a vital role if we are truly to thrive.

What should be the new purpose of mass education systems in the unfolding conditions of the 21st century?

Which educators are addressing the question and what does it look like? Philosophers of education, including Plato, Confucius, Voltaire, Dewey, Jefferson, Freire and a host of others, proposed purposes for education relevant to their time. The fundamental contention of this book is that our time, the mid-21st century, presents unprecedented challenges – some of which are existential – together with stupendous opportunities. Taken together they mean that today our species and its home planet stand on the brink of changes that, within the lifetimes of today's young learners, will impact upon their very nature.

The changes are complex and unprecedented.
Professor Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum (WEF), set out his view for the WEF in 2016. The changes are so profound that, from the perspective of human history, there has never been a time of greater promise or potential peril. My concern, however, is that decision makers are too often caught in traditional, linear (and non-disruptive) thinking or too absorbed by immediate concerns to think strategically about the forces of disruption and innovation shaping our future.

Thomas Jefferson was right when he observed that the purpose of public education was not to serve the public but to create a public. For his time, that needed to be the focus.
However, circumstances are transformed; consequently, this book takes as a starting point the stance adopted by Neil Postman in 1996: The question is not, Does or doesn't public schooling create a public? The question is, What kind of public does it create? A conglomerate of self-indulgent consumers? … Indifferent, confused citizens? Or a public imbued with confidence, a sense of purpose, a respect for learning, and tolerance?
The answer to this question has nothing whatever to do with computers, with testing, with teacher accountability, with class size, and with the other details of managing schools.
The right answer depends on two things and two things alone:
- the existence of shared narratives
- the capacity of such narratives to provide an inspired reason for schooling.

For change to become systemic, we need a new narrative about education's purpose that is authentic, based on evidence of our predicament, and is in tune with our deepest values. Everything starts with the story we tell about ourselves.

Economist Jacques Delors, in 1996 the report of the commission he chaired published:
Learning, the Treasure Within.
Given his association with UNESCO it is no surprise that Delors sought to position the purpose of education in a human rights-based development agenda. He tried to re-establish a humanistic tradition, linked to principles of equality, democratic participation and social justice.

The Delors report concluded that 'four pillars' of education were needed.
They were:
- Learning to know
- Learning to do
- Learning to live together
- Learning to be.

They were defined as follows:
- Learning to know – a broad general knowledge with the opportunity to work in depth on a small number of subjects.

- Learning to do – to acquire not only occupational skills but also the competence to deal with many situations and to work in teams.
- Learning to be – to develop one's personality and to be able to act with growing autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility.
- Learning to live together – by developing an understanding of other people and an appreciation of interdependence.

It certainly helps us to refocus on the human. Today, however, we see reasons for suggesting this formulation is inadequate to our time. They might be defined in terms of categories (learning and innovations skills; digital literacy skills; and life and career skills); or of the discrete 4Cs: communication, creativity, collaboration and critical thinking. The skills acquisition approach has a great deal to offer, and many educators have embraced it. But it is not enough.

The focus on skills has been supplemented by reference to the acquisition of character; or the more sophisticated concept of competencies.
With these, we approach the critical questions of values and goals that must underpin what it will mean 'to succeed' (the subtitle of so many recent books on education). The Nazis were highly skilled in communication, creativity, collaboration and critical thinking. It is the concept of 'success' therefore, which needs to be better understood and defined, in the light of a clearer conception of humanity's predicament.

In July 2015, the Director General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, said:
I am convinced we need to think big again today about education... The world is getting younger, and aspirations for human rights and dignity are rising. Societies are more connected than ever, but intolerance and conflict remain rife….. inequalities are deepening and the planet is under pressure. Opportunities for sustainable and inclusive development are vast, but challenges are steep and complex.
The world is changing – education must also change.

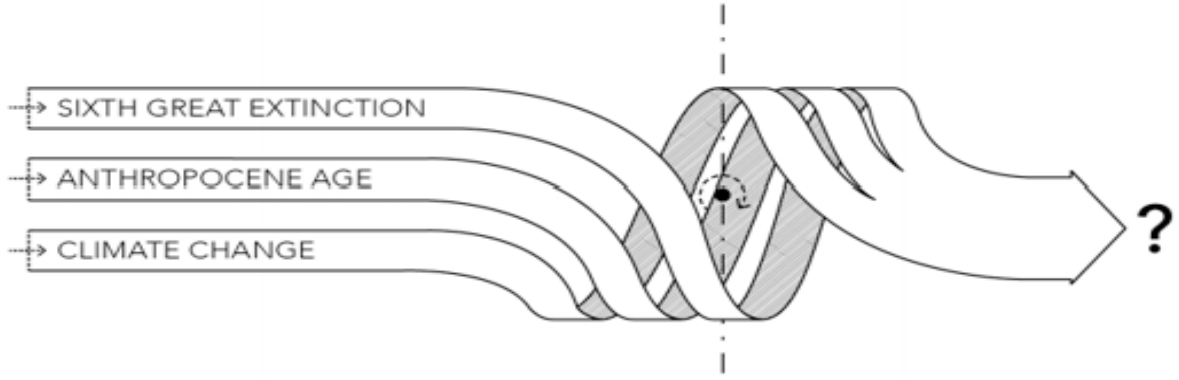
The question then becomes: what does it mean to thrive in this transforming world?

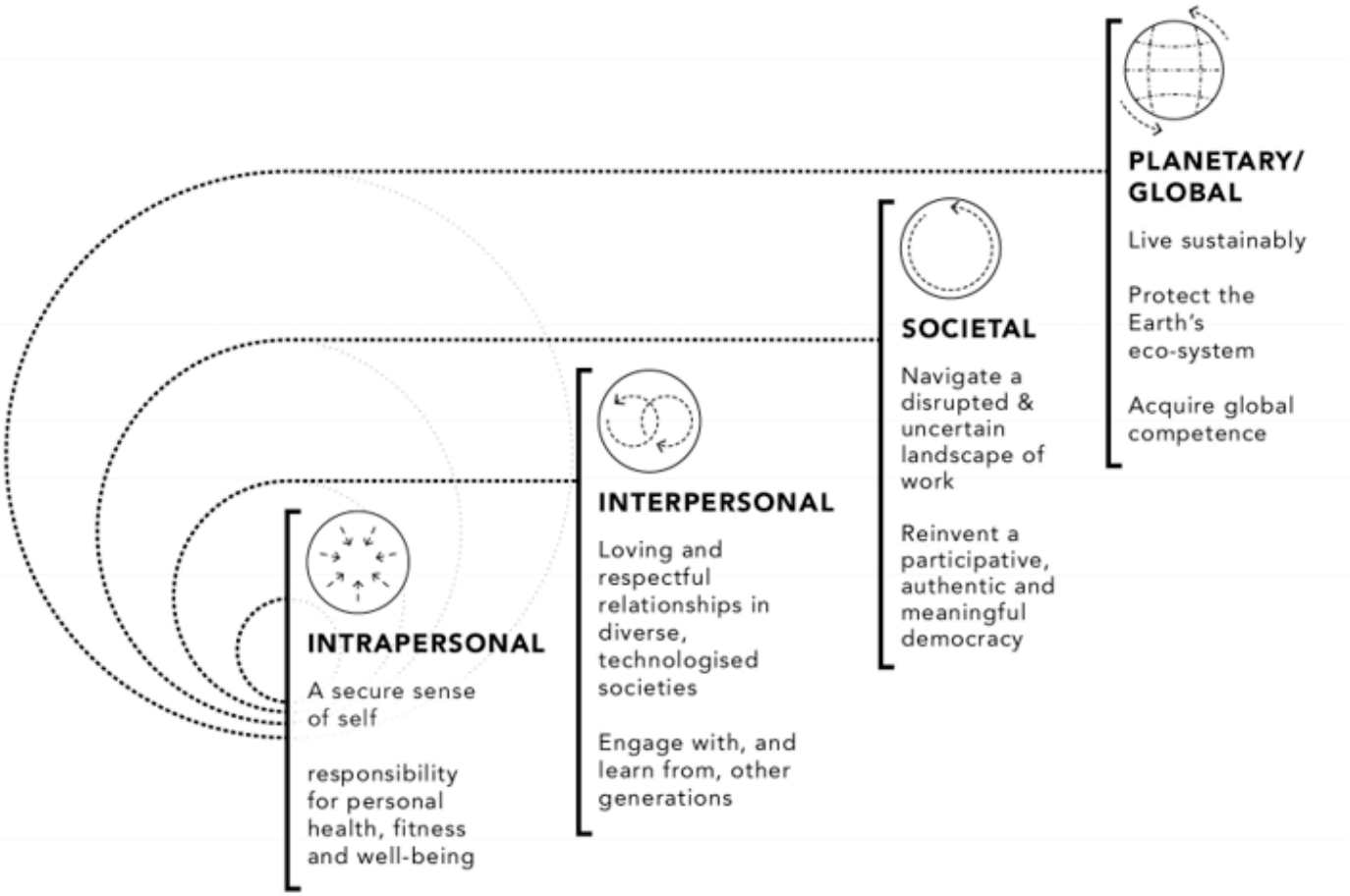
We are entering what scientists have now dubbed the Anthropocene Age, a term that entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2014. This is the new epoch of geological time in which human activity is considered such a powerful influence on the environment, climate and ecology of the planet that it will leave a long-term signature on the strata record.
The nature of that record will be oceans full of plastic (which is inert), mountains removed to access coal, and dispersed artificial radionuclides as a result of weapons testing.
The Anthropocene Age commenced around the onset of the nuclear age and coincided with the 'Great Acceleration' – massive increases in population, carbon emissions, species extinctions, and the boom in the production (and discarding) of plastics, metals and concrete.
The Age also witnesses the beginnings of the 'Sixth Great Extinction', or what Dirzo, Professor of Biology at Stanford, designates as the era of 'Anthropocene defaunation', because whilst previous extinctions were driven by natural planetary transformations (or catastrophic asteroid strikes), the current die-off arises from human activity. Fifty percent of all species could be extinct by the end of the century.

In summary: how can we thrive if our planet does not?

One blindingly obvious consequence is that any individual without knowledge and skills in STEM – or perhaps more specifically, technology – will be socially excluded, and unable to be a fully participating citizen. But equally, we will argue that in this new reality, the humanist and creative arts perspectives – which are equally essential for all to create and share meaning – are at risk.

Our planet at a tipping point?





There is a consensus that a point of disruptive change is arriving. It can be captured in a variety of ways:

- Karl Schwab has called it The Fourth Industrial Revolution
- Andrew McAfee and Erik Brynjolfsson of MIT call it the Second Machine Age.

Previous industrial revolutions changed our relationship to agriculture, made mass production possible and brought digital capabilities to billions of people.

Schwab argues that this 'revolution' is fundamentally different. It is characterised by a range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds; and impacting all

disciplines, economies and industries. It is even challenging ideas about what it means to be human.

The evidence of profound change is already around us:

- ubiquitous, mobile supercomputing
- sophisticated robots
- self-driving cars
- neuro-technological brain enhancements
- genetic editing.

The most profound 'pivot point' regarding technology is the breakthrough in artificial intelligence (AI), which points to a new generation of computers/robots with the capacity to learn and, therefore, self-programme.

So how to change and change to what?

A huge amount of work is necessary, some of it already underway. Amongst the many dimensions of this – including curricular and pedagogic questions – is that of measures or indicators. We have become so accustomed to the narrow range of indicators deemed by most systems to 'count' that broadening the focus seems unthinkable. The race to attain better qualifications to win an elite job (better paid and more immune to automation) will become harder. Moreover, the areas of employment that are expanding do not regard the existing systems of credentials with much confidence. And by definition, that 'race' can only be won by a very few. Tunnel vision on this narrow set of goals will not conduce to thriving societies.

Finding space for the unquantifiable

Looking beyond diplomas is a real challenge for schools when, for the tax-payers or parents paying for them, certificates and qualifications are the currency that is supposed to signify a job done.
Nonetheless, many people share the feeling that schools must pursue some goals that are immeasurable and un-assessable.
Even Donald Kamentz of Character Lab, a research organisation that relies on measurement, believes it has its limits:
It is now so hard to escape everything being measured, and there is kind of feeling that things that were innocent and pure and supposed to be about true formation and growth are no longer. People are trying to sort out ways to quantify all aspects of learning, but one might make the argument 'why do we need to do that?

Howard Gardner, founder of the theory of Multiple Intelligences, and more recently, author of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, **believes that schools' practice can transcend measurement and assessment only when schools really place their ideals and values at the heart of what they do.** Two places he believes manage this are Colegio Monserrat in Barcelona and the schools of Reggio Emilia, in Northern Italy.

Monserrat and Reggio Emilia are both examples of the power of commitment to a mission and vision. Both are completely committed to whole-person education, **and both place emphasis on children – from as early as they begin to talk and walk – being entrusted to be themselves, to express feelings and learn to manage and take responsibility for themselves.**
The schools' level of commitment to this mission means they have altered both their structures and practices to promote it, and in doing so have become role models for other schools. Reggio

has already become a model that rivals Montessori for its popularity in nursery and primary education. Monserrat is likewise gaining increased international attention.

Promoting purpose

In PSII, the Creativity Adda, Monserrat and Reggio Emilia, we see the value of having a sense of purpose, both as a school and as individual teachers and students within it. This is not to suggest we ought to be converting all young people into zealous missionaries, but more to propose that **schools have a role in introducing students to the idea of purpose:** to the possibility that they might develop what used to be called vocation (or calling), and the recognition that even if the meaning in our lives is entirely self-made that makes it no less sustaining, important and real.

As this book has shown, there is no shortage of problems to solve in the world, people to relate to, or places to be cherished. **The notion of creating silence and space at the centre of schools is not meant to block these things out, but to allow the time for children and adults to become open to them.** Otherwise we spend so much time in a quest to reach our goals, we miss discovering what is being lost along the way.

Across the world, some level of consensus is starting to emerge about the kinds of competencies people – young and old – will need.

The distinctive argument of this book is that this is necessary – but insufficient. The acquisition of those competencies (even assuming we get better at teaching people to acquire them) will not guarantee that they are deployed to promote a thriving humanity and natural world in transformed circumstances. Consequently, we need to begin a debate about our new purposes for education. It is overdue.

Purpose is about why we do things.

For too long in education we have neglected to address that issue. Ironically, research from the business world indicates a growing interest in the issue of purpose: a recent report from the Harvard Business Review Group with Ernst & Young1 reviews how strong the business case for purpose is. It concludes:

Today more than ever, companies are searching for a new genetic code that will help them continuously evolve—to survive and to thrive…. We found a very high level of consensus among (the executives interviewed) that purpose matters, and a widespread belief that it has positive effects on key performance drivers. The survey also demonstrates that companies who clearly articulate their purpose enjoy higher growth rates and higher levels of success in transformation and innovation initiatives. Given the strong sentiment that purpose is important and the clear benefits it seems to accrue, it is curious that purpose is utilised by only a minority of companies as a driver of strategy and decision-making.

It is even more curious in the case of education, and how ironic, that we might – again – be looking to the business world for a different perspective.

Nevertheless, debates about skills, pedagogy, structures, assessment and curriculum cannot be resolved if there is no clarity about the job we look to education to do: its core purposes.

While the content of any learning experience is important, the particular content is irrelevant. What really matters is how students react to it, shape it, or apply it. The purpose of learning in this century is not simply to recite inert knowledge, but, rather, to transform it. It is time to change the subject.

Reinvent and save ‘the school’

From the evidence so far, some characteristics of schools working to achieve goals related to the real challenges we face have started to emerge.

The first is that schools cannot achieve these purposes alone. They need to become part of learning eco-systems; this is exemplified by many of the cases reviewed in this book. Increasingly we see the emergence in a few schools – in the right project or with visionary leaders – of interdepend- ent systems of providers dedicated to supporting human learning across the full life cycle. These eco-systems of learning will incorporate diverse partners in the learning business, bringing a multiplicity of resources, skills, methods and opportunities to the piece. LRNG, the initiative of the MacArthur Foundation, illustrates this emergence.

When a school can connect its broader goals to indicators and measures it has a much stronger ability to protect those outcomes against other encroaching pressures. A serious debate is required about how to support schools to evidence and communicate these outcomes – one that needs to involve learners and their families, employers and civil society, as well as the professions directly involved in education. This debate also needs politicians with the bravery to go beyond the usual clichés about what schools are for, and give schools the support and accountability structures to achieve a better balance across the goals of education. We have to find ways to harness education to the project of our collective, and individual, thriving. Reinvented schools are critical to this process, but let’s create the conditions where it can happen at scale – rather than as rare exceptions.

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