Education for a Future of Change: Lessons from the Past — Re-examining Progressive Education

Lachlan E. D. Crawford

Introduction

“Education for a future of change” is a key slogan liberally expounded by politicians, administrators, captains of industry and educators (see, for example, Ngiam, 2002; Shamugaratnam, 2002). It stems from the need to prepare our children for an increasingly complex world, rapid technological advances and globalization of economic markets, all of which will place new demands on the workplace and the educational system.

In a highly competitive economic world, innovation will be a key factor. The generation of new ideas and improved ways of doing things will help sharpen the competitiveness of business. Teamwork will be important as workers in teams can see more possibilities and generate more ideas than single individuals. Technological awareness and obsolescence of knowledge also mean that workers must engage in life-long learning. At the opening of the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) conference in Singapore in June 2002, Professor Leo Tan, Director of the National Institute of Education, emphasized that in the new knowledge-based economy, tertiary institutions must work closely with corporate partners to update the skills of their staff throughout their period of employment (see Tan, 2002).

These demands have significant implications for education. To prepare for a future which Alvin Toffler (1970, p. 11) predicts will be characterized by a “roaring current of change”, the acquisition of mere content knowledge will no longer be sufficient. The Singapore Government has realized that the traditional model of
teaching, where pupils are expected to be passive receivers of knowledge in a predominantly teacher-centred learning environment, will no longer suffice. Instead, students will need to be active learners, in collaborative small groups with teachers providing guidance and teaching them the skills for learning. The school environment should be more conducive towards pupil exploration and the generation of new ideas.

The Government realizes that these demands on the education system mean that changes will have to be made in many areas of the education system including the content of the curriculum, methods of teaching and learning, and methods of assessment. Perhaps it is now opportune to learn from the past and re-examine the key principles of progressive education as many of the concerns expressed today were the subject of debate, research and pedagogical practices by earlier well-known progressive educators. This article briefly reviews the historical development of progressive education and considers three major principles associated with it: education should be related to the interests of the child; learning should be active; and the teacher should act as a guide and mentor.

Review of Progressive Education

Progressive Education or Progressivism is a philosophy of teaching and learning which stresses egalitarianism, learning by discovery and individualism. It stems from the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), a Swiss-born French theorist who profoundly influenced social, political and educational ideas. In his most famous educational treatise, *Emile*, a novel written in 1762, he attacked common child-rearing practices among the wealthier French middle class parents which emphasized excessive obedience and conformity to the role of "little adults." He also deplored the exclusively verbal and literary education which many parents forced upon their children. Such doctrines and practices, he felt, ignored the child’s natural interests and inclinations. One of Rousseau’s major contributions to educational thought was the idea that educators should base the curriculum on the child’s interests and needs rather than forcing the child to conform to a prescribed programme of learning. In some respects Rousseau, promoted the “romantic" view of child development, according to which children discover concepts and create experiences for themselves rather than deal with information given to them in a final form by adults (See William Boyd, 1962: *The Emile of Jean Jacques Rousseau*).
During the early twentieth century in America, the term "progressive education" was used by John Dewey (1916) and W.H. Kilpatrick (1934) to describe ideas and practices that aimed to make schools more effective agencies of a democratic society. Although there were many differences of style and emphasis among progressive educators, they shared the conviction that education meant \textit{active participation} in the education process that would affect their lives. The education of actively engaged children, according to this perspective, involves two essential elements: first, respect for diversity, meaning that each individual should be recognized for his own abilities, interests, ideas, needs and cultural identity; second, the development of critical, socially engaged intelligence which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common goal. These elements of progressive education have been termed "child-centred" and "social reconstructivist" approaches (Dewey, 1916; Kilpatrick, 1934).

During the early twentieth century in the UK, "progressive education" was promoted by such educational theorists and practitioners as Bertrand Russell and A. S. Neill, both of whom established their own schools. The former’s basic philosophy was that pupils should develop an inquiring mind and develop an individual character of vitality, knowledge, courage and sensitiveness. He proposed to do this by adapting teaching methods to each child’s special ability. Russell (1926) spoke of the project method and commented on the use of practical lessons in a variety of vocations for the instruction of children. A. S. Neill, in a similar vein, established an experimental school called Summerhill in 1921. He advocated that \textit{school should fit the child and not the child fit the school} (Neill, 1966, p. 4). He wanted to see the school promote initiative, responsibility and integrity where the ultimate goal was to produce children who were happy, well-balanced and sociable. The basic principle of the school was freedom for children to pursue their own academic interests (Neill, 1966, pp. 3–12). The school still exists today, run by his daughter Zoe, and has been the subject of intense scrutiny by academics, teachers, members of the public and, indeed, the British Government since its conception some eighty years ago. The major concern of interested observers, particularly the Government, is to ascertain whether the children at Summerhill receive an education which is sufficient for them to earn a living and be recognized as acceptable members of society.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Paul Goodman (1964), John Holt (1965) and Ivan Illich (1973) strongly criticized formal schooling with its regimentation, lack of
individualization, rigid systems of seating, grouping, grading and marking, and the authoritarian role of the teacher. They argued that schools failed to engender a zest for life, the powers of reason and imagination, the spirit of inquiry, tolerance and the enlargement of human sympathies. They were disappointed that their more child-centred ideas had not had more impact on “mainstream” schooling, due to the conservatism of many teachers and educational officials, and they took the ideas of progressive education in a more radical direction, helping give rise to the free school movement and home schooling.

These progressives campaigned vigorously, and often controversially, for new institutional structures of education that were available to all members of the public at any age and promoted the idea of “freedom” in a number of areas which are outlined below.

1. Freedom of access — the right of parents, teachers and children to work and play together on a partnership basis, to share the same facilities and participate in matters of common interest.
2. Freedom to learn in one’s own time, in one’s own way, i.e. without being required to attend a particular place during fixed hours and for a fixed period.
3. Freedom to establish, organize and manage schools other than those provided by the educational authorities.
4. Freedom to exploit resources for learning which are located in the community at large.

Essentially, they wanted more flexibility between courses and institutions, together with greater use of the media and resources in the community for learning. They also wanted the relationship between teachers and learners to change from the dominant/submission mode to learning through context and discovery where the teacher acts as a facilitator and a “learner among learners.”

In more recent years, progressive schools have been established throughout Asia in Thailand, Taiwan, Tokyo and Hong Kong. They have been set up as an alternative to the excessive formalism of traditional education with its emphasis on strict discipline, passive learning, drills for memorization, and question and answer methods of education which have dominated pedagogical practices in Asia for centuries. More progressive thinkers point out that as Asia moves into more creative services like software design and entertainment, the traditional educational structure is out-dated. Schools now need to be encouraged to foster individualism
and produce lateral thinkers and creative students (See Asia Magazine, November, 1996; Times Educational Supplement, 11 October 2002).

In Singapore, as the Government attempts to promote creativity, flexibility and innovation among school children through such initiatives as Thinking Schools Learning Nation, the IT Master Plan and Ability-Driven Education, perhaps the ideas of the progressive educators discussed in this article, may strike a receptive chord in the corridors of the Ministry of Education and may be worthy of consideration, particularly as the Minister of Education, Rear Adm. Teo Chee Hean stated:

We must encourage innovation and thinking in schools so that many different ideas and approaches can be tried at the same time. Good ideas should be shared and spread between schools and multiplied quickly (Straits Times, 31 July 1997).

The crucial point is that progressive ideas of education could be re-invented, built upon, transformed and adapted, where appropriate, to lay foundations for the children of the future.

There are three basic principles of progressivism: education should be related to the interests of the child; learning should be active; and the teacher should act as a guide and mentor. These three principles will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

**Basic Principles of Progressivism**

1. **Education Should be Related to the Interests of the Child**

The progressives argued, rather optimistically perhaps, that a child is naturally disposed to learn whatever relates to his interests or appears to solve his immediate problems. According to A.S. Neill (1966, p. 4):

My view is that a child is innately wise and realistic. If left to himself without any adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing.

Thus the progressives advocated the “child-centred” school in which key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught and how it will be assessed will be taken by the learner.
Of course, it is always a mistake to assume that learners come into the classroom with a sophisticated knowledge of pedagogy, or with a natural ability to make informed choices about their own learning processes. In fact, experienced teachers realize that there are relatively few learners who are naturally endowed with the ability to make informed choices about what to learn, how to learn and how they want to be assessed. In a child-centred school, therefore, Dewey (1916) argued rather more pragmatically than A. S. Neill that the teacher does not hand over power, responsibility and control to the students from day one. Rather, the teacher educates learners so that they can gradually assume greater responsibility for their own learning. This may be achieved by a process of negotiation in which the views of the learner as well as the pedagogical agenda of the teacher are taken into account — a procedure of give and take. This procedure has been well documented by Nunan (1999), who incorporated the process of negotiation in teaching English as a second language to adults. His ideas, modified for primary and secondary schooling, are outlined in the following sections.

Step 1: Allow Learners to Create their Own Instructional Goals and Content

The first step in giving learners a voice in the learning process would be to allow learners to create their own instructional goals and content. An interesting and practical way of doing this is through an "action meeting" which provides an opportunity for individuals to negotiate what particular topics or projects they would like to study within the overall parameters of a particular subject. This is also a good way to facilitate group cohesion and motivation as students choose to study what they want to study (Nunan, 1999, p. 19). In science, for example, primary school children exploring the principles of flight may choose to research and construct a hot air balloon, or a kite, or a paper airplane, or a hang-glider. In social studies, pupils investigating instruments for keeping time may choose to look at the history and development of watches, or pendulum clocks, or sundials, chronometers, or water clocks.

Step 2: Help Learners Identify their Preferred Learning Styles and Strategies

The second step in the development of a learner-centred classroom is to raise awareness of different learning strategies. These may include whole-class work, pair and group work, individualized learning, cooperative learning, self-access learning and learning beyond the classroom. To assist students in their choice and to introduce this process gradually, these strategies may be introduced, first by the
teacher for all students during the course of a normal term’s instruction, and then
the students can make their own choices (Nunan, 1999, p. 21).

Interestingly, this approach has been implemented at two primary schools in
Singapore where the teachers customize teaching methods to suit the pupils’ dif-
ferent learning styles, temperament and abilities. For example, if children are
given questions on a comprehension passage, those who learn better in groups are
encouraged to sit together so that they can talk it out among themselves. Those
who like a “hands-on” approach may act out the passage to the class. Meanwhile,
the independent learners are left to do their work at their desks. The fast workers
are then encouraged to read books from the class library or play with puzzles
while their classmates complete the comprehension passage (Lee, 2002). To date,
there has been no evaluation of this customized teaching and its successful con-
tribution to the promotion of learning would obviously depend, to a large extent,
on the social skills, responsible attitude, motivation and maturity of the children
involved in the various activities.

Step 3: Framework to Maximize Choice of Learning Strategy

Even though pupils in a “child-centred school” may select their own instructional
goals and work with their preferred learning styles, Nunan (1999, pp. 171–196),
unlike A. S. Neill, advocates that they still need guidance to maximize their edu-
cational experience. This can be achieved through a framework of negotiation
which includes:

(a) identifying appropriate procedures and resources for achieving the objective;
(b) setting a realistic time-frame; and
(c) identifying the means for self-evaluating the learning which has taken place.

This schedule has a number of important pedagogical advantages. In the first place
it helps to focus the attention of the learner on the task to be accomplished and
ensures that once the task is under way, the resources are available to complete the
project. This enhances motivation. Second, a realistic time frame helps to keep the
student on task without too much prevarication and ensures a sense of achievement
when the task has been completed. Third, self-evaluation helps to develop the
learner’s self-critical faculties.

Step 4: Allow Learners to Negotiate on How They Would Like to be Assessed.

The final stage in this process of negotiation is to allow learners to negotiate how
they would like to be assessed. This, of course, cannot be done in isolation from
the schools' formal agenda of norm-referenced term, annual and nation-wide examinations, used for the purpose of determining a student's level of performance relative to the performance of other students of a similar age and grade. However, there could be some allowance for student choice of criterion referenced assessment in particular subjects and at particular times of a student's academic career. In the early stages, students can be given a limited choice of assessment from a "menu" of assessment procedures. As they become more aware of their capabilities, the scope of choice could be widened.

The advantage of this approach, particularly in a Singapore educational context that values high performance, is that students tend to maximize their chances of attaining good grades as they are working in a framework of assessment which suits their talents, temperament and abilities. The argument against it, however, focuses on the difficulty of comparing the performance of students who might submit written essays with those who may opt for oral presentations or portfolios of work. The answer, of course, is that teachers do not compare students' performance with that of fellow students, but rather with specific established standards of criteria in each mode of assessment.

2. Learning Should be Active

The progressives rejected the traditional view that learning consists essentially of the relatively passive reception of knowledge and that knowledge itself is an abstract substance instilled by the teacher in the minds of his pupils. In contrast, they argued that the search for abstract knowledge must be translated into an active educational endeavour in which experience and experiment become essential components of the learning process (Dewey, 1916; Kilpatrick, 1934).

An essential characteristic of this process is the awakening of children's consciousness along a path of learning which leads from a state of passivity to a creative experience whereby students are in charge of their own educational development. The following sections examine a number of ways students can embark on an active educational experience.

Solving Problems of a Socially Significant Nature

One way of encouraging students to be "active" would be through solving problems of a socially significant nature. As soon as these socially significant problems become synonymous with the content and raw materials of the educational process, learning can no longer be seen as a transfer of crystallized knowledge.
Instead, it becomes a perpetual grappling with subject matter. Grappling, in turn, is to be understood not only as physical motion, that is in handling test tubes or counting concrete materials, or navigating with map and compass, or raising one’s hand to vote, but as critical thinking, reconstruction of previously held ideas, and discovery (Dewey, 1916).

At the secondary level, problems to be solved could include the provision of community services to the elderly; the correction of urban eyesores; the creation of anti-pollution programmes; the forming of social action groups to eliminate poverty; or the establishment of social work and hospital assistance groups. In the liberal arts, problems could include establishing a radio station, writing television scripts, creating newspapers, or launching little theatres.

A suggested format for problem solving could be:

- selection and identification of a problem which springs, in the first instance, from the students’ natural curiosity to learn;
- research to discover how others have grappled with a similar problem in other contexts and at other times;
- analysis of the methods to solve problems;
- synthesis of ideas and methods to solve the problem in the local context;
- testing of ideas in discussion with peers and teachers;
- preparation of a plan, or a schedule for implementation.

To promote this approach in schools, teachers could move away from such traditional subjects as economics or geography and substitute thematic and multidisciplinary approaches to learning whereby there is a shift away from learning discrete content to learning from experiences which draw on a variety of contexts and cut across traditional boundaries within and across subject areas. Problem areas for study could then include transportation, communication and trade. In Singapore, students in the Gifted Education programme have been studying the problem of noise level in particular places to assess how it is affecting people there (Ministry of Education, Gifted Education Branch, 1998).

The advantage of this exercise is that it engages pupils in information processing, problem solving and decision-making situations; encourages pupils to explore the inter-relationships and interconnectedness of subject-specific knowledge, use sources that go beyond textbooks, work collaboratively with their peers, think critically and creatively and communicate findings effectively.
Learners as Researchers

A second way that education can be active is to encourage students to become researchers. For example, it may be possible for students to embark on some simple form of ethnographic research. This calls for activities which document and explain social behaviour within groups. Ethnography explores behaviour holistically within a social setting of customs, values and styles of communication. Data sources are people, objects, environments and communication patterns inherent in the context under study (Charles and Mertler, 2002, pp. 238–261). In schools, it may be used to illustrate in some detail the conditions and interactions of individual or groups of children.

For example, primary pupils could be asked to document a typical week in the lives of five children in EM1 and five children in EM3 attending the same primary school. To give students some guidelines in the conduct of their research, they could address the following issues.

(a) What commonalities tie group members together?
(b) What seems to be the key life perspective of this group, e.g. overworked, misunderstood, superior?
(c) How do these perspectives cause the group to react, e.g. aggressively, submissively, escapist?
(d) How does the group attempt to deal with the demands made on them?
(e) What language patterns are associated with the group?
(f) What are the groups’ preferred activities?
(g) What patterns of leadership, friendship, domination are noted within the group?

A major appeal of this activity is that it can construct a richly detailed picture of human life which is interesting, informative and potentially filled with implications, for example, insights into social behaviour and how greater social cohesion may be encouraged amongst pupils in the same school.

Another simple form of research to promote active learning would be descriptive research which is conducted to depict people, situations, events and conditions as they currently exist. The information obtained satisfies a desire to gain increased knowledge about the focus of interest and may frequently provide a basis for decision making. An example could be: what role does a particular school play in the life of the neighbourhood community? Other topics for
research, selected on the basis of negotiation with the teacher, could include describing the conduct of religious festivals in Singapore; investigating the use of ethnic musical instruments; tracing the history of lotus paste moon cakes; or examining the role of Singapore personnel in UN peacekeeping forces.

The major sources from which information is obtained are physical settings, records, documents, objects, materials and people directly involved. Additional information may be obtained from newspaper accounts, photographs and people who possess knowledge of the situation but are not directly involved.

Learners as Presenters

At a more challenging level, the principle of being active could lead learners to become presenters. Students could present findings from their ethnographic or descriptive research discussed above in narrative form possibly enhanced by numerical, categorical and graphic illustrations.

Assinder (1991, p. 228) reports that the advantages of such an approach are that being asked to present something to members of the class gives a clear reason for the work, calls for greater responsibility to one’s group and leads to increased motivation and greatly improved accuracy. Moreover, being an “expert” noticeably increases self-esteem and confidence.

3. The Teacher Should Act as a Guide and Mentor

This implies that the teacher works with the children for the attainment of mutually agreeable pedagogical ends. The progressives reject the authoritarian manners of the all-powerful teacher who is prepared to transfer packaged knowledge to “ignorant” pupils. Instead, they advocate that the teachers place their own greater knowledge and experience at the children’s disposal and help them whenever they reach an impasse. Dialogue thus becomes an essential dimension in a common effort at both the understanding of reality and the acquisition of knowledge.

The teacher is vitally important in establishing the necessary framework for the process of learning, acting as a guide and coordinator and bringing forth from the class through dialogue everyone’s free and conscious participation in a common effort. Romantics would say that teachers and learners would then embark as sailors on an educational voyage of discovery and adventure. This process is common at the postgraduate level in universities where the professor acts more as
a resource person than a dictator of studies and there is no reason why it should not be applicable for elementary and secondary students as well.

**Implications**

(1) To cope with a future of change, teachers and students could benefit from an appreciation and application of progressive or child-centred educational ideas to help promote the MOE's initiatives of *Thinking School Learning Nation*, *IT Master Plan* and *Ability-Driven Education*.

(2) To promote creativity, flexibility and innovation, education could be related wherever possible to the interests of the child, by allowing learners to create their own instructional goals and content, identify their preferred learning styles and strategies, and choose how they would like to be assessed, through a process of negotiation with the teacher.

(3) To encourage children to take an active role in the learning process, they could engage in problem-solving, conduct ethnographic or descriptive research and act as presenters of material to the rest of the class.

(4) To develop the independent spirit of enquiry, the teacher could act more as a guide and mentor to students rather than a distributor of knowledge.

**Conclusion**

Today, research scholars, educational administrators and practising teachers are re-discovering the concept of progressive education and exploring its relevance to an age of global capitalism and profound cultural change. Scholars are finding that although some of the progressives wrote over a century ago, their insights into democratic culture and meaningful education suggest helpful alternatives to the regime of standardization and mechanization that still tend to dominate our schools. In this era of significant change, there are a number of implications which can be drawn from this article for school personnel.

**References**


