

Calling out for the Possible! Is it Our Chance to Make it Right?

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, humanity is confronted with an increasing number of complex challenges. The Anthropocene's core tenet, the impact of humans on the world, leads us to aspire to a more sustainable future, putting the possible at the centre of societal development. Educational contexts provide a unique platform for future citizens to engage with the possible, calling for the advancement of strategies that can intentionally contribute to expanding opportunities for embracing the possible. This commentary explores how contemporary challenges can be a driving force to redesign educational contexts to effectively embed the possible in their practices and pedagogies, in an effort to raise awareness and elicit a sense of urgency about the importance of the possible as a field of study.

KEYWORDS:

anthropocene, creativity, education, pedagogy, possible

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INTRODUCTION

From hunter-gatherers to small communities to cosmopolitan cities, humankind has faced increasing challenges over hundreds of thousands of years, leading to increasing complexity and unveiling previously unknown requirements for creative possibilities. Humankind is now addressing challenges that create a sense of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) (Johansen & Euchner, 2013) on a global scale, drawing attention to one of the key aspects of the Anthropocene: the duality between progress and nature (McPhearson et al., 2021). Sustainability is now viewed as critical in defining future pathways. The call to make the Anthropocene as thin as possible (Priyadharshini, 2021) echoes around the globe with increasing demands for creativity in the pursuit of a post-Anthropocene, which will hopefully reveal a better future for all. At this level, the human ability to adapt and steer the course of individual and collective action brings human agency (Bandura, 2001) to the fore, making it imperative to understand how to effectively embed its development in human life contexts, such as educational ones (Valqueresma & Coimbra, 2021). Simultaneously, it elevates creativity to a higher plateau where the key competencies for the future stand. In this light, our goal is to raise a sense of urgency regarding the enactment of individual and collective agency in educational contexts, specifically through the promotion of an active engagement with the 'possible'. Moreover, by igniting this debate, we hope to establish the need for researchers and educators alike to explore methods for making the possible more explicit in the classroom.

THINKING ABOUT THE POSSIBLE

The importance of developing 21st Century Skills for a workforce capable of embracing new and more complex challenges (OECD, 2019) has received significant attention over the last decade. This viewpoint has spread to the societal level, where these skills (which include, amongst others, creativity, critical thinking and collaboration) are presented as necessary for creating a "human force" capable of solving the global, complex and (until recently) unforeseen problems we are now confronted with. Indeed, given the current geopolitical, social and cultural challenges, it appears that now is the time to use these skills as a toolkit to empower individuals and societies with new capabilities to embrace what once seemed (im)possible, or not yet here! Such complex challenges require a nuanced and multi-layered approach to the possible. In his work, Glăveanu (2018, 2021) suggested a space in which thinking about the possible is explored on a societal, individual and pedagogical level, with the purpose of fostering the common good. Instead of delving into the idea that the possible coexists with communal living, the focus is directed towards the collective, namely how life in our societies could change. In this light, the possible may support efforts to engage with the post-Anthropocene by designing desirable fictitious futures which may then be followed by strategies to make them attainable (Mangion, 2022).

Engaging with the possible presents an immediate opportunity to redesign educational contexts. In fact, the anticipation of problems through scenario planning and other tools has been available for a long time. Unshackling ourselves from the current realities using techniques like wishful thinking (de Bono, 2015) can instill hope and positivity along with the willingness to take ownership of the decisions made (i.e. develop one's sense of agency). Forward-looking through the notion of the 'not yet here' as a field of inquiry, on the other hand, elevates the possible to a positive and empowering stance. The possible is then transformed into a tool for designing futures. Furthermore, because of its dialogical essence, the possible not only nurtures self-development but can also engage communities at the cognitive and sociocultural levels (Glăveanu, 2018), because, if on the one hand intellectual elements are at play when weighing out what is actual and what can be possible, on the other, envisaging the possible requires focusing on the interaction between oneself, the other, and the World. By providing opportunities for creative action, we can also cultivate an engagement with the possible. Cognitive flexibility and perspective-taking are exercised through creative experiences, which contribute to imagining unknown possibilities. Furthermore, developing the ability to apply combinatorial thinking through the manipulation of various pieces of information may result in perspective-shifting (Mangion, 2022), giving the educator the opportunity to change a worldview on a given situation while opening the possibility of generating novel, original ideas that may offer an element of surprise when compared to the current mode of doing things. However, combinatorial thinking may be potentially limiting, especially if a focus on appropriateness (as required when looking at creative efforts) is retained due to social or self-imposed judgement (Boden, 2004). New ideas about (and in relation to) the possible need to be challenging. Avoiding fixed patterns by adding malleability and agility to our cognitive processes may potentially put humans in a better position to engage more actively, on a sociocultural level, with the diverse interactions that occur between actors, their audiences and the affordances that influence their actions. This pressing need to rewire thinking processes by intentionally investing in creative experiences (Beatty et al. 2016), may unfold a perspective on possibility as a skill that can be developed, while making the intersection between the biological, cognitive and social omnipresent in the wake of the call to engage with the possible. In fact, the widely known concept of 'Possibility Thinking' (Craft, 1999) in education alludes to the generative processes that occur in creativity and other domains. This concept was introduced to symbolize the transformation from "what is to what might be" (Craft & Chappell, 2016) and represents a shift to "what if", "what can I or we do?" as opposed to fixed modes of "What is?". In this regard, the concept of 'Possibility Thinking' lends itself well to the exploration of the possible, because the 'not yet here' is given space via a cognitive shift in how we generate alternatives. This mode of thinking and interpreting situations may enable a transformation in attitude and aptitude for us humans to engage with the possible. However, despite having gained momentum for some time, empirical research in this domain is still scarce, indicating the challenges of materializing the possible within educational contexts.

FINAL COMMENTS

Calling out for the possible! This commentary was inspired by a sense of urgency to discuss the materialization of a new conceptual domain: the possible. As we hope this brief commentary has made clear, it is our opportunity as researchers and educators to make things right by exploring the pedagogies and strategies that may contribute to a more positive, brighter future. To accomplish this, we must make the time to explore the unknown, the uncertain, and the 'what if?' The possible opens up new opportunities to (re)design educational contexts to broaden possibilities", but more research is needed to effectively elicit and disseminate tangible pedagogies of the possible that encourage creative action, human development and participation.

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