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Learning for the
Post-Pandemic World

**Chris Brown &
Ruth Luzmore**

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Learning for the Post-Pandemic World

BY

CHRIS BROWN

AND

RUTH LUZMORE

emerald **PUBLISHING**

There is no occupation so sweet as scholarship; scholarship is the means of making known to us, while still in this world, the infinity of matter, the immense grandeur of nature, the heavens, the lands and the sea. Scholarship has taught us piety, moderation, greatness of heart; it snatches our souls from the darkness and shows them all things… scholarship furnishes us with the means of living well and happily; it teaches us how to live our lives without discontent and without vexation.

–Cicero (45 BC), Tusculanae Disputationes

Real change often takes place in deep crisis, and this moment holds the possibility that we won't return to the status quo when things return to 'normal'. While [the COVID-19] crisis has deeply disruptive implications for education, it does not have predetermined implications. We have agency, and it is the nature of our collective and systemic responses to these disruptions that will determine how we are affected by them.

–Andreas Schleicher (2020), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Praise for *Educating Tomorrow: Learning for the Post-Pandemic World*

> This engaging book cleverly uses the past and the present to point the way to an education fit for the future. Change is forever with us, but, today, it is writ large and the needs of tomorrow will be unlike those of today. Thought about what should happen in schools has a tendency to focus on the minutiae of today's practices in order to make them better for tomorrow. Refreshingly, this book looks at the bigger picture and provides a basis for more relevant practice. I will be recommending it to my students and colleagues.
>
> *–Professor Douglas P. Newton,*
> *Durham University, UK*

> What can we learn from the past that can help us create a more promising future? A hugely enjoyable consideration of the many and variable influences on education combined with suggestions of where we might focus our energies next. An important debate for us all.
>
> *–**Dame Alison Peacock**, Chief Executive of*
> *Chartered College of Teaching, UK*

> The coronavirus has ripped off the veneer of equity and the pretence of solidarity that existed in many societies previously and exposed the fundamental unfairness and unsustainability of our modern world order. Whatever the future holds after COVID-19, we should try at all costs not

just to go back to the way things were as our default option. With Educating Tomorrow, Chris Brown and Ruth Luzmore draw upon the broad sweep of educational philosophy and current developments such as artificial intelligence and transhumanism to chart a better way forward. Written with verve and panache, this will be a welcome addition to every thinking person's library.

–**Dennis Shirley**, *Duganne Faculty Fellow and Professor, Boston College, USA*

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INTRODUCTION – WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITH A BLANK SLATE?

This book begins with you using your imagination. In particular, it starts with you picturing this scenario:

> *…it is 2035 and a deadly pandemic has swept the world, killing millions. Without a cure in sight, the virus has led to economic collapse, mass unemployment and the return to a barter-type system as people attempt to secure basic foodstuffs and medicine for themselves and their loved ones. Seizing the opportunity to increase their powers, governments have become increasingly authoritarian, with surveillance at an all-time high and police forces given the right to detain citizens for leaving their homes without authorization. In an attempt to slow the spread of the virus, governments have also sought to 'lock down' the world: international travel has been banned, national borders re-enforced, groups are no longer allowed to congregate either publicly or in private and all sport and face-to-face public*

*education have ceased. Nobody knows how
long the situation can continue before the world
reaches breaking point, or indeed what might
come after…*

While in 2019 such a scenario could be viewed as existing purely in the realm of science fiction, by early 2020, as the COVID-19 virus emerged from the Chinese city of Wuhan and rapidly spread, it soon becomes a science fact. The catastrophic social and economic effects of the virus were felt across all corners of the globe. Within months, millions had become infected while hundreds of thousands had died. Weddings were cancelled and limited numbers at funerals meant mourners grieved over Skype. Bars, cafés, restaurants, shops, factories – anything not deemed vital for day-to-day life – were temporarily closed and social distancing measures introduced for whatever remained open. Planes no longer flew, ferries no longer carried passengers and traffic fell silent. Millions shifted from offices to home working so that reliable Internet connection, devices and a space to work became a commodity. Mass unemployment in the services section soon became the norm and GDP shrank in most countries, sometimes by more than a third. Schools were closed in 184 countries, impacting some 1.54 billion children (91% of the student population) as well as their parents who had to attempt a balance between home working and ensuring that home learning happened.[1]

Living through the COVID-19 pandemic has been both a scary and a heart-warming experience. At the beginning we saw the worst of society: people hoarded goods, and for the first time since World War II, supermarket shelves were empty, bereft of normal everyday items such as toilet roll and pasta. Domestic violence and online gambling increased and

children from disadvantaged families, unable to receive free school meals, went hungry. Others game-played to take advantage of what was on offer, with some profitable companies, rather than take a hit for the public good, using government safety net and furloughing schemes to protect their bottom lines. The nation held its breath as the serving British Prime Minister was taken to intensive care suffering with the virus bringing the reality of its impact sharply into focus. Some in positions of authority resigned after knowingly flouting lockdown rules. Others were unapologetic, leading to many people feeling there was one set of rules for those in power and another set of rules for those without. Certainly, errors were made in the handling of the crisis and enquiries into events such as the horrifying numbers of deaths in care homes, and the rates of mortality in BAME communities will be essential in rebuilding trust, holding those in power to account and learning lessons for the future.

But through the steady stream of depressing news, there was also much to celebrate in the actions of people. For some, a stronger sense of community emerged as neighbours met for the first time and volunteered to support those in need to pick up their shopping, deliver medicines and get their Zoom account working. Hundreds of thousands signed up to community and NHS volunteer schemes. Concern that medical staff had sufficient personal protective equipment to keep them safe as they attended to infected patients meant that some organisations quickly turned their production over to sewing gowns, making visors and cooking meals for NHS workers. Heroic and inspiring efforts were made to raise money for charities – such as that by Captain Tom, a veteran who, in the weeks leading up to his centenary, completed a sponsored walk which raised over £30 million for the health service. A renewed respect for public service workers and those keeping the country running emerged. Rainbows of

hope were drawn, painted and even knitted all over the United Kingdom and proudly displayed in windows in support. Supermarkets prioritised entry to key workers so they did not have to queue; and once a week households gathered on their streets or balconies to applaud the health service workers risking their lives, banging saucepans and waving flags. Emergency funding was provided to give homeless people shelter during lockdown and hotels offered rooms to key workers who needed to isolate from their families and continue their work.

In addition to sadness for the bereavement we were experiencing and the mixed emotions one normally feels when observing society at a distance, as we began to emerge from the worst of the pandemic, we also began to feel something else – however – a sense of optimism in anticipation of what changes may be coming next. This sense of hope had emerged because of the reaction to COVID-19 by administrations and authorities worldwide. The new courses of action adopted by government proved so radical and so disruptive to our day-to-day lives that they also served to fundamentally challenge our understanding of what might be politically and economically possible. So not only did COVID-19 destroy lives, but also it seemed to rampage through the political and social status quo, ripping it up and tossing its pieces into the air to be scattered by the wind. The result has been to leave a situation where different ideas can be entertained. And although some may hope for a return to how things were, we [the authors of this book] see the idea of a post-COVID world as potentially providing the opportunity for a *blank slate*: a chance to rethink what kind of society we want and how it might be brought into fruition.

It is vital that we do not leave these choices to others: this potential blank slate provides all of us, not just governments, with the opportunity to now think a bit differently. For

example, we can start to entertain the type of ideas that arise when we consider hypothetical questions, such as the following:

> *…if you designed society from scratch what would it look like? How would power be structured? Would there be democracy or would you place yourself in charge? What services might your government provide and what might citizens be expected to do for themselves? What about the economy? Will people work and if so, how are they rewarded? What mechanisms would you use to (re)distribute wealth? What is an acceptable gap between haves and have nots? What would your policies be regarding the environment?*

If you actively responded to these statements while reading, we are guessing your answers reveal that, although there is much you enjoy about the society you currently live in, there are probably many things that really irk, that do not live up to your sense of justice and that you would like done differently. In one sense, the process of engaging in this type of thinking is similar to playing strategy-type video games such as *Civilisation*, which appeal exactly because we can attempt to create new versions of the world in our own image. But something we do not consider with 'finite' games such as *Civilisation*, which end when we reach our goal, but which we do need to think about for projects such as creating new 'blank slate' societies, is how we perpetuate them for generations to come.

We [the authors] believe that the best way to achieve this is through education. What people often fail to realise is education is humanity's superpower. Well, one of them at least. Education enables societies to accumulate our understanding of the world (and beyond) and to make progress, to establish

and perpetuate norms and values, to foster recognisable and acceptable patterns of behaviour and to challenge and disrupt the unacceptable. When we harness this superpower effectively, it ensures we create the citizens of the future by passing on to the next generation our hopes and dreams, our values and our desires (as well as our desired behaviours). Education also enables us to support future citizens by equipping them with what they need to flourish: knowledge, as well as an understanding for how this knowledge can and should be used and built upon. But we can also harness education to ensure the next generation develops the emotional and intellectual dispositions required to help them find their way and the competencies that are necessary for success.

While the post-pandemic world does indeed offer something of a blank slate, the trick to taking advantage of it is being able to harness the right amount of imagination. When we are inside the box, it is difficult to think outside of our current constraints! So to do so, we first need to find ways to help us think differently about what it is we want from our own real-life (but 'infinite') versions of *Civilisation* and then to think deeply about how we might employ our educational superpowers to achieve these goals. And with this book, our aim is to do just that. Naturally, our parameters will necessarily be different from *Civilisation*, precisely because we are not starting completely from scratch, nor are we completely free of the social movements, globalised trends and inherently 'wicked' problems (a term to describe problems with many interdependent factors which make it seem impossible to solve) that are likely to rear their heads over the next 5 to 10 years. To reach our goals, we must begin, therefore, by understanding where we got to before COVID-19 hit us, as well as incorporate into our thinking what we predict is likely to happen in future. We must also consider the wisdom of the past and the ideas and ideals we may have lost sight of and

which might, once again, be helpful. It is only when we have explored these three things that we can begin to make suggestions for what should happen and how best to realise our ambitions. Engaging in such a process therefore requires that we take you and your imagination on a journey. And this journey begins with two pictures: one of the present and one of what might be coming next.

The first picture, which depicts the here and now, is briefly sketched out below. It's important not to forget that the world we inhabit, COVID-19 aside, has had very mixed fortunes over the last decade. On one hand, technology has enabled us to achieve things our ancestors would never have believed possible: redefining the way people communicate, collaborate, shop, travel, read, research, watch films, gather information, book holidays, bank and so much more.[2] Digital photography and social media have enabled us to capture, represent and share the world in previously unimaginable ways; tools such as 3D printers allow us to make real our designs for anything, from sculptures to fully operational bridges, at the flick of a button. Technology has also helped us to become more cultured: although the advent of cheap travel and *Airbnb* has ultimately proven to be an environmental nightmare, as well as serving to disrupt the social dynamic of many popular cities such as Venice and Barcelona, it also ushered in a new egalitarian age of travel. As a consequence, as well as broadening horizons, it has expanded opportunities to learn: with apps on our phones helping us to quickly and easily understand how to communicate in a multitude of languages, while augmented reality helps us find out more about the places we are visiting. In terms of the economy, artificial intelligence (AI) and mass automation have been transformative, with much routine and low-skilled work now undertaken by robots and algorithms. This use of AI is set to continue, with code created by machine learning making surprisingly insightful moves: from picking

up features in medical images hitherto unspotted by humans to making profitable trades on the stock exchange.[3] AI will also take over many tasks that machines can perform equally or better than humans: everything from processing insurance claims to driving and space exploration. As a result, a higher proportion of the jobs available involve more complex problem solving, higher levels of creativity and the ability to collaborate well with others. Advances in medicine, as well as our understanding of how to live well, means that people are now also staying alive longer. Of particular note is that worldwide life expectancy has already grown from 64 years in 1990 to 70 years in 2012. Child mortality fell 41% over the same period.[4] Diseases such as smallpox have been eradicated and those such as malaria, measles, polio, rubella and filariasis also appear to be on the way out.[5]

On the other hand, however, we have also been living in a *post truth* world, in which verifiable facts are both debated and subjected to interpretation. Post truth has been facilitated by *Web 2.0*: the second stage of development of the Internet, which brought with it a new age of dynamic and often user-generated content and the growth of social media. While the first few years of Web 2.0 were greeted with the optimistic belief that this new form of Internet would usher in a world of plurality, collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, what we have actually seen is a splintering of consensus and the emergence of echo chambers: spaces where those of similar views come together and where outsiders are dismissed as 'trolls', ensuring entrenched perspectives are safe from challenge.[6] AI and automation are also proving problematic. While, in the past, new technologies served to create as many jobs as they have taken away, as the productivity of technology has begun to increase, so have the number of jobs being lost without being replaced. This is worrying, not least because pre-COVID estimates were