

Book Review

Postformal Education: A Philosophy for Complex Futures

David K. Scott

*P*ostformal Education, as a title, may appear forbidding. However, the reader will discover a book on transforming education, in which the word “love” appears 189 times and “wisdom” 279 times. By contrast, the word “test,” so prevalent in educational circles these days, occurs only 39 times! The contrast is reminiscent of a statistic from Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, in which the phrase “survival of the fittest” appears only twice while the word “love” occurs 95 times, as noted by David Loye. We seldom mention the word “love” in the teaching of evolution or education more generally. The reason may lie in the author’s assertion: “What masquerades for education today must be seen for what it is: an anachronistic relic of the industrial past.” Her solution is an education based on four core values—love, life, wisdom, and voice. Without “voice” in an age of proliferating communication devices and social media, the first three will be harder to incorporate.

However, the transformation is far from simple. As the author writes, “This book is not for the faint-hearted, or those wanting to tinker with the edges of the outmoded schooling model. It raises a planet-wide call to question how we think and how we educate. It charts a course toward a post-formal education philosophy based on the most advanced developmental psychology and education research—as a foundation for educational futures. ... If higher order, more complex forms of cognition do exist then how can we better educate children and young people so that more mature forms of reasoning appear at the appropriate life stage?...Put simply, we cannot solve tomorrow’s problems with yesterday’s thinking.”

Jennifer Gidley is well equipped to assume this formidable challenge. She is an Australian

psychologist and educator at the University of Technology, Sydney, and President of the World Futures Studies Federation, a UNESCO and UN Partner. Her speaking and research collaborations span many countries including Australia, Europe, USA, Middle East, and Asia, and she serves as a Fellow at the Center for International Studies and Research in Paris and at the Botin Platform for Innovation in Education in Spain. Her previous books include *The University in Transformation*, *Youth Futures*, and most recently *The Future: A Very Short Introduction*.

She is not only a theoretician, philosopher, historian, scientist, artist, poet, and sociologist but also an innovative practitioner. Creativity is her hallmark. Early in her career, she founded a modern, creative version of a Rudolf Steiner School in rural Australia, where she taught for ten years. Of this experience, she writes:

I knew learning could be otherwise. As a responsible participant in their (and my) joyous learning of every imaginable subject through stories, drawing, painting, singing, movement, drama, music, poetry, mythology and play, I have guided numerous children from the age of five or six to puberty. And perhaps as a surprise to many mainstream teachers, the children also became literate and numerate in the process. But instead of just developing a narrow, functional literacy, they developed rich and broad literacies. They learned to read for meaning, to write creatively, to share, to respect nature, to imagine worlds beyond their immediate one, to have social confidence, a passionate love of learning and the courage to be the ones to change the world.

Perhaps an apt subtitle for this path-breaking work is her phrase, “Megatrends of the Mind,” since the main thesis is that human consciousness and cultural evolution encompass several stages. While she does not go so far as to claim, as did Haeckel, that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, she draws on the work of many philosophers, sociologists, historians, educators, and scientists who have promoted this idea. The title of the book, *Postformal Education*, derives from the work of the educator Jean Piaget, who in the mid-20th century identified four stages of development, culminating in formal operations; many theorists now recognize additional stages of post-formal reasoning. Gidley also draws on the theories of evolutionary stages from Steiner, Gebser, Aurobindo, Wilber, Bohm, and Laszlo, among many others. The details differ, but they map an evolution through mythic, archaic, rational, analytical stages to an emerging integral, holistic perspective. Successive stages do not totally reject earlier ideas; rather they transcend and include. While the notion that human consciousness and culture have evolved is largely undisputed, the new revelation in this work is that now the evolution allows our active participation in a post-formal, integral, and planetary consciousness.

Gidley argues that our educational models, which she identifies with the mid-18th-century industrial expansion and a mechanistic approach to education, are overly formal and analytical. Now the evolution of human consciousness liberates us to address the complex challenges facing a very different, 21st-century world. While the tools and the theory are available, educators are paradoxically slow to incorporate the research. The message, in short, is: If we are to change the world, we must change our way of thinking. Just as we have moved in the past from pre-modernism to modernism to post-modernism, this book portends a transformation to trans-modernism.

Twenty diagrams in art, science, and spirituality enliven and illuminate the challenging

and densely packed ideas dating back thousands of years up to the present and illustrating how many seemingly modern ideas have roots in antiquity. In earlier times these ideas were unexamined and natural. Now the collected research presented in this work enables us to understand the connections. The various stages of consciousness evolution were all necessary to bring us to our modern understanding. In addition, 40 tables summarize concepts and logical connections of ideas from many cultures and bring the text to life. The style, design, and construction of the book model its holistic, integrative content.

In a breathtaking voyage through the past, present, and future, this book synthesizes an extraordinary wealth of research and educational philosophy. It is structured into three sections, each with three or four chapters. Part I frames the book in the context of the evolution of consciousness. Part II gathers the existing research on higher stages of reasoning, revealing links between play, wisdom, imagination, ecology, holism, and love. The book stresses the well-established theory of multiple dimensions of intelligence although most current models of education focus on only one. Drawing on these studies, Part III articulates four core pedagogical principles central to a post-formal model of education—love, life, wisdom, and voice. Based on these four principles, education can prepare young people to become complete and whole individuals, more appreciative of multiple perspectives, more trans-disciplinary and connected.

Like a Greek Chorus singing stern warnings in unison, there is now a growing movement inside and outside the academy advocating a new educational model. In the words of Hegel, “The Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.” Philosophy comes to understand a historical condition just as it passes away. The book suggests we are at such a branch point in choosing how we want society and culture to evolve.

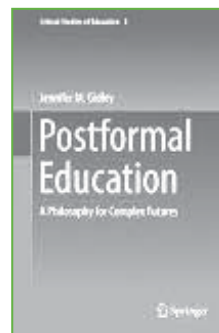
There are many nascent movements—integral and integrative learning, contemplative practice, meditation, and spirituality in education—giving intimations of the transformation advocated in this book. Presently, these movements are like separately flowing streams. This path-breaking work by Gidley leads to a convergence of the streams into one river, carving out a path for educating future generations to be more humane, caring, and committed to building a better and wiser world. She also shows that many of our problems may be interrelated. We do not ignore stress and teenage suicides in our schools and colleges, but we set up separate offices to address them. Perhaps the proposed transformation might serve as a universal solvent in an integrated approach to the education of mind, body, and soul.

As the Industrial Age was taking hold, there were counter-revolutions such as the Romantic Movement and the Transcendentalist Movement in the 19th century, each with intimations of an integrative and spiritual approach. Steiner based his philosophy of education on similar ideas, as did the Paideia principle in ancient Greece. Philosophers in the 16th and 17th centuries sparked the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment with ideas soon integrated into the general thinking and education. Now we have rigorous research from philosophers, scientists, psychologists, educators, sociologists, all drawn together in this far-reaching book. Perhaps we are on the verge of a new Enlightenment, led once again by thinkers from many disciplines. Can they all be wrong? When we think of the evolution of consciousness and culture, we also think of three great periods of human activity—the Agrarian Age, the Industrial Age, and the Information Age. The author cautions us that the Information Age, despite its potential for greater connectivity, is unlikely to be the harbinger of the educational revolution advocated in this book. Rather we should look at the next emergent level of consciousness as the sign of a coming Integrative Age. Let us hope it does not take

decades to blossom. The Information Age could, however, serve as a catalyst to accelerate the transformation.

The words of the poet, Christopher Fry, came to my mind while reading this book: “Thank God our time is now when wrong comes up to meet us everywhere, never to leave us till we take the longest stride man ever took. Affairs are now soul size.” Gidley shows that the challenges we face in the world and education are indeed now soul size; she provides us with soul-size transformations. Everyone interested in a better future should read this book. It may inspire us to act before it is too late.

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