Interview with Professor Keri Facer, University of Bristol
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It was a keynote presentation by Professor Keri Facer at the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) international conference and subsequent article in Literacy (Facer, 2019) that sparked the discussions which inspired the focus of this special issue. In July 2021, with a mix of end of term exhaustion and intellectual exhilaration we gathered online to interview Keri and do that important activity we rarely manage to achieve in our performative academic culture, that is, to talk and think together. We wanted to share this process with you and so we present our questions and Keri's responses with minimal editing and with the 'epistemic hope'[1] (Ojala, 2017) we felt in that moment and want to share.

Introducing Professor Facer

Keri is Professor of Educational and Social Futures at the University of Bristol and Professor of Education for Sustainable Development at Gothenburg University. Her research is concerned with better understanding the role of education (both formal and informal) in creating the conditions for ecologically sustainable and socially just futures. She is particularly interested in developing more democratic, critical and participatory processes for imagining and negotiating routes to sustainable futures. In this interview she is speaking in a personal capacity. Her arguments, she would like us to clarify, are as likely to be based on personal experience as on research and should be read accordingly – as propositions and provocations for further conversation.

When we put out the call for this special issue there was some debate about assumptions being made about the times being 'troubled'. Could you share your thoughts about what continues to be troubled about our times?

I think the reaction on Twitter [where it was assumed that a CFP on troubled times was missing the reality that other times have also been troubled] was a misinterpretation of the paper as being precisely about the COVID moment as opposed to the broader reference that I was thinking of - namely, that our 'troubles' are multiple and escalating and multiplying.

We have the combined problems of the ecological and the climate crisis. We have radical and deepening inequalities. We've got the legacies of colonialism and continued deep racism. We've got runaway and increasingly authoritarian governments. And then we've got a load of other things that we're just trying to work out - what does it mean to live in a world that has got really changing employment practices like zero hours contracts and deep casualisation? How are we going to deal with our technological innovations? I mean this morning, they just announced that we now know how proteins fold, which is fascinating and could completely change how we 'engineer' the human body[2]. They just used Artificial Intelligence to work out how proteins fold. I mean, this is radically transformative. We don't know what the implications are.

So, clearly we are living in times that are troubled. Whether we can say these are the most troubled times anybody's ever lived in or not, isn't really the most important question. What is useful about

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[1] ... 'hope as not only an emotional/cognitive concept, but also as a way to cope with difficulties. (Ojala, 2012, p.6)

[2] https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2021/07/researchers-unveil-phenomenal-new-ai-predicting-protein-structures

asking this question though, is that it reminds us that people *have* faced trouble before and that we can learn from *how* people have faced trouble before.

I also think these challenges [whether the times are particularly troubled or not compared to history] are useful. When people say, 'hang on, is this just a problem for a bunch of middle-aged, middle-class white people who've never really struggled before', particularly in relation to the climate crisis and Covid, I think there are some legitimate concerns there. That doesn't mean it's not a real problem. As with any definition of a problem, it is relational, it is situated. And we do have to work harder to develop new ways of thinking about how these many different 'troubles' interconnect with each other. One way of doing this is to think about the underlying mindset sitting underneath a lot of these issues, which is what Kim Nicholas[3] calls the exploitation mindset - which is that people and the planet are being exploited for the profit and the wealth of an increasingly small number of people. In other words- how do we connect up these 'troubles' and then tell the story about how that might be different.

As an editorial team we have been discussing the impact on children of the perception of the world being troubled and there's a dilemma there - do we encourage them to think critically and historically or try to reassure them?

It's tricky, I think we have to be really careful because if all we do is tell young people's stories of problems, then what are we actually achieving in that process? There's a really interesting paper on teaching as 'terror management'. I don't know if you've come across it, but my interpretation of it is basically that we as adults, get scared about things and we then proceed to tell the kids everything that we're scared about. And then we think we've done our job.

This is not adequate. We need to create opportunities for young people to learn how to act with each other of course, but we also need them to know that we as adults and particularly in schools are taking responsibility as well. That is what creates what Maria Ojala (2017) calls 'critical hope' or 'epistemic hope'. There are some really serious examples in my home city of Bristol, where schools are completely changing where they get their energy from, for example, which shows that schools are not just teaching about this, they are doing something about it too. That's where we need to get to – not just in relation to climate, but the living legacies of colonialism and the deep inequalities we are facing.

In your original paper you share your concern about the key narratives and 'future focus' about the relationship between education and uses of new technology. How do you view those narratives in the light of the switch to online teaching and learning during lockdown? Are we any more focused on the here and now?

The switch to online has led to what often happens, which is to intensify the inequalities that already exist. And the thing is that there's no excuse for that because some of us were talking to government about this 20 years ago and saying that the situation [of digital inequalities] cannot be ignored and had to be taken seriously. The fact that these inequalities still happened is deeply frustrating and was an unnecessary situation. What also concerns me is that we continue to not pay enough attention to the way in which the digital is being used to survey and to monitor our children, to reduce privacy, to produce data for commercial organizations. And on that score in education we are walking absolutely

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[3] https://www.kimnicholas.com/under-the-sky-we-make.html

blindfolded into the corporatization of education systems and the assumption that children should disclose everything about themselves to data companies. That to me is the most dangerous aspect of all of this. And I think it gets lost a little bit in some of the discussions about online or face-to-face. I really recommend reading Ben Williamson's[4] work on this topic.

The flip side to this zoom world is that, you know, within two weeks of lockdown suddenly people were able to organize incredibly quickly to bring groups of people together. We were able to say: how do we make connections across places in a way that was impossible to imagine before? It's also now become impossible for people to say, 'I'm sorry, I have to get on that plane for that two hour journey in order to have this conversation with somebody.' So – there are upsides.

The value of storytelling activities in research is often associated with 'giving voice' or 'empowerment' but these are complex and contested terms….

This language of 'giving voice' is problematic – kids have their own voice, the issue is – is anyone listening? If we invite young people to write what they believe, what they see, what they feel - and suggest that they will change the world through that writing, then I think there is an obligation upon us as educators to try to say, 'actually, how *do* stories then effect change in the world and how do you organize around them?' How do you start addressing questions of who's listening to and hearing what's being said by young people? We might want to ask - how do we think change happens through writing? What work can writing do in the world? We also need to build some relationships between those of us working in literacy with people who've got experience of social movement building or politics.

At the same time, there are other reasons for writing – that aren't about 'giving voice' or 'empowerment' but that are internal, introspective - about coming to know yourself, understanding your unique view of the world. This is precisely what poetry, in my view, is – the development of an absolutely unique perspective on the world. Here, we aren't 'giving voice' to young people, but creating conditions for them to hear their own quiet voice.

The use of voice, agency and empowerment as ways of thinking about storytelling also frame the teacher / facilitator and the learner / child in very particular ways. How do we navigate this or challenge this and can technology help?

I don't know if I can answer this question, but a couple of things come to mind. First, that surely what education is is about creating conditions in which children can come to encounter the world – Biesta (2022) talks about this a lot in his new book. So – it isn't about a hero narrative for teachers – the 'terror management' idea I mentioned earlier – where schools are trying to churn out people who will do the things in the world that we want but can't achieve ourselves (which is quite often what the words agency, voice and empowerment are referring to). Instead, it's a way of thinking about how we can create the conditions in which young people are invited to really confront and engage with each other and with the world, to understand it, and to explore their responses to it and how they can act in it. It's about creating conditions for people to be able to notice, attend, think and feel – not about empowering them to fulfil a particular political project.

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[4] https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/ben-williamson

The question also makes me think about Karen O'Brien's[5] work at Oslo on what she's calling quantum social theory. This helps in relation to these questions of agency. She helps us to recognise that we are living in dynamic, complex systems where there can be a significant and unpredictable effects from just one person's actions. This is useful, as well, because otherwise we can get tied up in the idea that the world is just as it is, that it can't be changed. Actually there's lots of different ways in which change happens.

So – when we think about teacher-student relationships in this setting, we might think of both teachers and students working in conditions of complexity, where we don't know what the outcome will be of the encounter (Biesta again) and where the challenge is to create conditions where something new can emerge. Which is why writing is so useful – it's a way of both noticing and encountering and reimagining the world. Whether it's on paper or digital, I don't think really matters – the trick is to be noticing, writing, making.

Sometimes children are invited to tell stories about their particular experiences of issues that impact on them and it's as if we think that's the only story that they might have to tell.

Of course, there is something incredibly dangerous and shortsighted about telling anybody that they've only got one story to tell (not that I think this is something that great teachers do).The people I turn to around this are Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2019), who talk about education as a site for creating knowledge in common. This means that while of course we all bring our own story to an educational setting – and this needs to be recognised, understood, valued and acknowledged – you aren't required to be defined by that. You can hold it lightly. You can also learn from the stories of others, explore their experiences and talk with each other. Some of Deborah Osberg's most recent work on curriculum talks about this brilliantly.

Classrooms also can be places where we can tell complicated, multi-layered stories – no one person is just one thing, no one community is just one story. Octavia Butler's[6] work and Afrofuturism (I'm thinking of N.K. Jemisin's brilliant collection 'How Long Till Black Futures Month' in particular) are great examples here - they offer rich complicated narratives that tell tales of longstanding inequalities, violence and harm while at the same time, talking about spaceships and rockets and becoming a different sort of person time-traveling. I think understanding that all of us have complicated stories and histories in us that involve many different things and futures that might be radically unpredictable and different from those histories is actually where we have to get to.

Funders have particular agendas to address disadvantages which still label people in particular ways. Do you see any changes to this?

We spent a couple of years doing a project called Common Cause Research[7], which was looking at how universities and Black and Minority Ethnic community organizations and individuals work together. And what came out of that very clearly was that core organizations in BAME communities have not been properly resourced and funded. And so you continue to get the situation where majority white middle-class institutions are making arguments for funding on behalf of other groups, because

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[5] https://www.youmattermorethanyouthink.com/

[6] https://www.octaviabutler.com/

[7] https://www.commoncauseresearch.com/

those groups have not been resourced to be defining the agenda that matters to them. And so you, you get a really dysfunctional set of dynamics – including essentialising people through the use of labels.

Fundamentally I think a lot of us should be asking: am I the right person to be making these decisions, or leading this bid or applying for the resources here - and on whose behalf am I actually speaking and should I be? How can I get out of the way, or partner with and get behind the incredibly talented people in all the different communities that I'm not part of, so that they can take a lead on this. We need to be building the funding infrastructure so that the knowledge can be generated from within communities that have not had access to the resources of universities and funding agencies in the past. This has been going on for a really long time and we have to be careful of our own role and complicity and all of that.

Do you think the medium is important to the process of storytelling?

[When writing the article] I had been spending quite a lot of time with oral storytellers and I had been completely blown away by that experience and by how stories change in the moment when they're told orally and how they grow and how they get enriched. The wonderful storyteller Martin Shaw[8], whose work is just astonishing, has some really interesting ways of working with stories. He will tell a story and then he will invite everybody listening simply to say what resonated for them in that story at the end. That process is the opposite of all of our training. I don't know about you, but my English literature degree was not just 'tell people what resonated with you.' It was, you know, 'pull those texts to pieces and tell us how it works.' Right? So Martin's invitation is the opposite of that. In that process where people reflect upon what they heard, as it goes around the room, you hear the same story but told again, in many, many, many different ways. He calls it, 'feeding the story'. If you think of a story as a culture, I mean, it's something that you have to put things into to keep it alive. Right? What you've got is an incredibly human interaction that is relational, where the story is growing in interaction between storyteller and person. So – oral storytelling is a distinctive and undervalued form that I'm so pleased to see is growing again. I think it's one of the most important experiences and I would love every child in the country to have the experience of both hearing a great oral storyteller and themselves learning to keep stories alive like that, as a living practice.

Could you talk to us about the work you've been doing on the concept of 'Futures Literacy' and where storytelling fits into that?

Futures Literacy is an idea that comes out of Futures Studies – it basically proposes a curriculum and pedagogy for thinking about and working with 'futures'. Its aim, put simply, is to help students reflect on the assumptions that they are using when they think about the future. There is a lot of interest in this at the moment and much of it is being driven by UNESCO. And there is huge benefits in creating conditions for young people to think critically about the ideas of the future they are being presented with

The idea that it is a 'literacy' though is a little bit contentious. On the one hand, it draws attention to how we produce narratives and stories about the future. This I can buy. On the other it suggests a sort of 'universal' capability – the idea of being 'futures literate'. Which is more contentious. Arathi

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[8] https://drmartinshaw.com/interview/

Sriprakash[9] and I have just tried to work through this latter point in a recent paper – where we have tried to put Literacy Studies into dialogue with Futures Studies. We wanted to make the case that just as there is no such thing as one form of literacy (there are many different situated literacies) well it's the same for how we think about the future. There isn't one approved way of thinking about the future that you should roll out globally from Europe to the rest of the world in order to correct everybody else's 'inappropriate' modes of thinking about the future. We've seen what happens when you do that with the global standardisation of education and its not good for the diversity of ways of thinking in the world. This is not to say that we can't widen the repertoire of resources we have for thinking about the future – absolutely we can do that – but we shouldn't start saying that there are only these approved ways of thinking about the future and all others are essentially 'illiterate'. Arathi and I wrote this paper to try to intervene in what we saw as a standardising and universalising move.

But I suppose more broadly, the reason I've always been interested in futures and why I'm drawn to the question of how we nurture richer futures literacies - is that they are powerful stories that have an effect in the present. Which is why its really important to democratise and pluralise the process of telling theses stories so that we can resist the idea that there is just one future that is going to happen. After all, we do not and cannot know what the future is going to be.

And here, I guess, to go back to your opening question – is another reason the 'troubled times' narrative can in fact be problematic because it risks suggesting that there is only going to be one future, an inevitable world of 'troubled times', and that we know what it is. This doesn't really make sense – we don't and cannot know the future.

So one of our challenges is to work out how we tell stories about futures that are open to the unknown. How do we tell stories that pay attention to chance, contingency, accident or to strange discoveries? You've only got to think about the discovery of penicillin for example - and here I'm not trying to suggest that the future is only about scientific and technological transformation - but it was reasonably haphazard [it involved the accidental discovery of mould] you know, and reasonably haphazard things will happen. Good and bad. Chance, accident, contingency are really important aspects of change. So – telling stories about futures need also to play with this idea. It's not about prediction, it is about thinking about whether the stories we are telling about futures are going to help us explore all the possibilities that are open to us – for ethical and responsible action – in the present.

You suggest that to be an educator today is to be confronted with an urgent question about how our teaching is adequate to the times we're living in. On that first day of switching to online teaching [in the Covid-19 pandemic] this really resonated. Do you have any reflections on what we all, as teachers and educators, need to do 'in the richness of the meanwhile'.

Honestly? Right now? [this interview was conducted at the end of the summer term in 2021] Have a rest if you can. Look after yourself as well. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm pretty tired. I mean the last year has been hard and I have no doubt that a lot of educators are exhausted and will be asking themselves, can I keep doing this?

I think actually that's such an interesting moment. Isn't it? When you're exhausted and you let a lot of things go and your ego isn't strong enough to kind of hold together what you've always held together

9 https://www.bristol.ac.uk/people/person/Arathi-Sriprakash-495c4274-4220-443b-aea9-ff8015306d6b/

in the past. It's almost a moment of collapse that you can learn from. I know that when I'm tired I can't put up with as much nonsense, I can't just 'perform' – I have to really think that what I'm doing matters and that what I'm doing is adequate to the situation. I think we should acknowledge how tired we are and how dysfunctional a lot of the things that educators are being asked to do are. And perhaps we can use that moment of disenchantment as a moment to get angry, as a moment to say, this is not okay, these students have one life. We have one life and we have to be doing work that enables us all to live well in the world. I think it is about allowing those emotions that quite often, we don't allow to come to the surface, to come to the surface in order to really, you know, get angry and say, we can't put up with this any more.

My brilliant colleague Lorna Smith (2020) has just finished her PhD on creativity in the English curriculum, going back to the 1920s. And she has documented what has happened to the concept of creativity, what has happened to the idea of imagination and it's a really useful historical analysis that we can draw on to say 'it has not always been this way.'

So – right now - I can't say what anybody else should do, but at this point in time, I am reviewing what I'm teaching and reviewing how I'm teaching it and asking, 'do I really think this is helping my students given the world we live in today?' How much of this is just automatic processes that we're just going through because that's what the administration system requires me to do. How much of it is something that I think is on that brilliant edge of a liveliness that you have when you're working meaningfully with your students? And then the question is how do I generate the energy to do more of that? Maybe we just have to embrace that moment of just not knowing what to do, let things go and then see in that sense of failure and in that sense that 'this is not okay,' what emerges, what's going to come out of that.

And again, I'm not anti-digital, but spending as much time as you can sitting somewhere quiet outside and having a think feels like a good plan for a little while.

Can we end by thinking about the kinds of conversations that have come from the paper?

I think that the paper sort of came out of a moment of, not collapse, but just - I haven't got the energy to keep being polite and reasonable and measured. I have to speak from my heart about what I see as the responsibility and the possibilities of education in the context of climate change and serious inequalities, because, because that's all I've got the energy left to do - and it's clearly resonated with a lot of people. There's a lot of people who've said, 'you've said things in here that I was thinking or feeling. I'm really glad somebody said it.' So to be honest, I'm not sure how much of a provocation it was, because in the end, it just, it seems to have hit a nerve with people. I should probably revisit it now. I've spent the last two years working in a lot more detail on questions of climate change in education. I suppose what I would say now that I wasn't saying then is really around the structural and organisational changes as well as the individual changes that we need to work on. How do we tell new stories about schools as institutions and their role in their communities and their relationships with each other?

The other thing that really has happened between when I wrote that paper and now is the student movement - the school strike for climate – and the Black Lives matter Protests. And so we're at a really interesting moment where actually as educators, we can encounter young people in a different way – as, in some cases, people really enthusiastic to work alongside us, to invent and create different futures. We're not really doing this yet. In relation to climate change - one of my master's students –

Emily Barr - has just finished her study of students' experience of what they've learned about climate change in secondary school and it is deeply disturbing because they seem to have focused mainly on plastics as a problem and that's about it. Now that's just one school, but still – these sorts of findings are replicated when we look at the state of climate education as a whole.

To me schools could be places where we can talk with students about the different causes of climate change, and of racialised inequalities, and about the possibilities of addressing it by rethinking our relationships with each other and with the planet. And from this, we can start exploring with them, what sorts of futures we might imagine and what sorts of stories we can tell.

If we want to support students to begin to create plausible stories of the future, particularly in relation to climate change, though, we probably need to work across subjects and make connections with scientists, engineers, historians, political scientist. We need to feed the imagination from many different perspectives. One example of this is a brilliant project called The Rough Guide to Notterdam[10], which has been made by some friends and colleagues in Lund University who have done a 'rough guide' for this city called Notterdam in 2045 where the city has successfully achieved a low-carbon lifestyle. The guide is based on research and urban innovations that are already in train. They've also done a great project called Carbon Ruins, which is an imaginary museum we enter and look at all the objects of the 'fossil era' from the past, when they have been phased out. It's brilliant.

So one of our big questions might be - how do we write or make amazing whole school cross-curricular stories about the future of the communities in which we live now? We can ask students to imagine this place in 2045, when we've made things happen that we want to happen. What does it look like? What does it feel like or taste like? What does a day look like? How did we get there? What needed to happen? What needed to change? What gets in the way of that change? How might that be tackled? And then on the basis of that, what steps can we take now? We don't have to take big steps.

Another action is to see ourselves as social actors – both as students and as teachers. Again, in relation to climate change but you can see parallels with a whole range of issues that students might want to prioritise – we can also start to work on the future. One of the critical things that's coming up this year is the COP[11] Conference – the United Nations Climate Change Conference that will happen in Glasgow in November. That is huge. It's going to be a huge, critical moment. Simple things we can start saying, and they're all great literacy practices, is who do we need to write letters to as a class or a student body or as a school? What are we going to say? What are we going to include? What pictures are useful to make the point? What arguments? Which MPs do we need to speak to? Who has power and influence beyond politicians? These are brilliant literacy practices that we can get really involved with. And again, particularly when kids are really anxious, it's just really important to show them that other people are working to do stuff, to support them, to get them involved in these wider movements, because there's nothing more terrifying than being told this really scary thing happening and they are on their own.

We seem to say it more to children than to anybody else and make it children's responsibility.

The idea that you project onto children your own anxieties - it's not defensible. But we have to acknowledge that we as adults are also struggling with so much going on. Perhaps the thing is to pick

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[10] https://www.climaginaries.org/roughplanetguide
[11] https://ukcop26.org/

the issue that you connect with deeply, and focus in on that, because otherwise you can get very fragmented and pulled in lots of different directions. My hunch is that the ability to make a change is driven by a love of the world. It's attending to what we love and care about, letting ourselves be vulnerable and acting for that. This brings us back to the present, it keeps us attentive to what is happening right now – it isn't about wishful thinking or fear or escapism, its about opening up the cracks of possibility in the present as a basis for acting, taking responsibility and just getting on with things. [12]

The authors wish to thank Keri for her time and energy and acknowledge how helpful her notion of *the unpredictable effect of one person* has been in helping us all navigate our complex and multiply troubled experiences of the last year with optimism.

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[12] https://kerifacer.wordpress.com/2020/03/31/11-things-ive-learned-from-educational-futures-work-that-might-be-helpful-for-covid-19/