CHAPTER 9

From Official Document Utopias to a Collective Utopian Imagination

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Introduction

Essentially, there are two ways to think about the function of the social sciences. One is to focus on the production of empirical results ("facts") with various research methods. The other is to consider the creation of ideas ("possibilities") around what social reality—in this chapter, the digitalization of education—could be like (see Eskola, 1984; Gergen, 2015; Wright, 2010). In this chapter, we develop the latter approach by arguing that we need utopias and a utopian imagination of the digitalization of education to create alternative and possibly better futures (whatever they may be). We further argue that these futures cannot be known or invented

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in advance *for* people as some intellectuals, rulers, or governments have done, but rather *with* people engaged in particular educational and other practices.

The futures that we focus on are those of the digitalization of education. Digitalization has in recent years shaped a prominent narrative that impacts educational policy and practice, and its significance has only been heightened by COVID-19 and the push to establish online and hybrid teaching and learning. The future of the digitalization of education is formulated mainly by megacorporations in alliance with international and national policy-makers. These players include global institutions such as the OECD, EU, WTO, and five large high-tech corporations (Ball, 2012; Robertson, 2009; Verger, 2013). They tend to claim that digitalization "revolutionizes" and "disrupts" more or less all walks of life, including education (Suoranta et al., 2022).

From the perspective of practicing educators, these discourses are manufactured in advance, they presume consent and consensus, and they often disregard local knowledge and contexts. As such, they represent "formal freedom," "the freedom of choice within the coordinates of the existing power relations," whereas its opposite, "actual freedom," assumes dissensus and "designates the site of an intervention that undermines these very coordinates" (Žižek, 2002, p. 544).

This chapter aims to critique this limited view of the future of the digitalization of education and locate alternative approaches within utopian thinking to co-create alternative "postdigital" futures. Although some have wanted to leave the definition and meaning of postdigital for multiple interpretations (Jandrić, 2022), for us in this chapter, the term postdigital signifies simply the increasingly ubiquitous and messy existence of our lived experience, social structures, and processes with digital technologies, as opposed to the juxtaposition of "the analogue" and "the digital" (see also Cramer, 2014; Cramer & Jandrić, 2021; Jandrić et al., 2018).

Martin Heidegger noted that technology as an object tends to withdraw from our lived experience (Gallagher, 2014). It becomes invisible to us in use. We "extend" ourselves with technologies to act on our projects, but at the same time, technologies use us (Ihde, 2010). Furthermore, technological understandings of our state of being can lead us to see ourselves as objects and resources to be used (Salminen & Vadén, 2015, p. 9). This can be considered a source of our problems: we forget technology is "there" not only as a socio-material actor, but also as something that always requires tangible materials such as rare metals and—most of

all—energy (Salminen & Vadén, 2015). We therefore need techniques that penetrate such thinking and bring it into the debate.

As an approach to challenging the present and to co-creating and imagining alternative futures, taking into account the local knowledge of ordinary people, we present the Method of Empathy-Based Stories (MEBS). In addition, in this chapter, we draw from the interdisciplinary field of utopian studies (Marks et al., 2022). For example, Żuk (2020) has noted that modern social sciences and utopian thinking are interlinked, while Wright (2010) sees "real" utopia as a road for more *emancipatory social sciences.* Utopian thinking can therefore be seen as a process for getting people involved in more democratic decision-making (Żuk, 2020). To achieve this, Levitas (2013) proposes utopia as a public hermeneutic and constitutive method or as "speculative sociology" (Levitas, 2013, p. 218). In imagining alternative futures, sociologists could have a role in expanding people's views beyond the current (neoliberal and other) modes of thinking (Żuk, 2020, p. 1057; see also Wright, 2010).

Utopian writing has a long history of classical and Christian influences (Kumar, 2003). But it was Thomas More who coined the term *utopia* (*ou*: not and *topos*: a place; meaning 'nowhere,' or when pronounced as 'eutopia,' 'the happy place' or 'place of the happy') in his *Utopia* (1516). Since then, utopia "as the expression of the desire for a better way of being and living" (Levitas, 2013, p. xii) has traveled through human history as one of the most common terms with which to imagine the future.

Different centuries and epochs have had their utopias. Antiquity had Plato's *Republic*, the Renaissance saw the publication of More's *Utopia* with Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), and Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651). The Enlightenment produced, among others, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) and Denis Diderot's *Supplement of Bougainville's Voyage* (1796). Interestingly, education is one of the central themes in these utopias in one way or another (see, e.g., Bierman, 1963; Bejan, 2010; Halpin, 2001; Webb, 2022).

The nineteenth century saw the rise of socialist futures influenced by utopian socialists such as Henri Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, and Charles Fourier. They redefined and broadened the concept of utopia from a socialist perspective and created their thinking based on humanistic ideals (Engels, 2020; Leopold, 2011). Marx and Engels despised utopian socialists mainly for their system-building and detailed speculations on future societies, but their criticism was contradictory as they praised the original

generation of utopian socialists (Leopold, 2007; Paden, 2002). Recent twentieth-century utopias included such works as H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Remarkably, the twentieth century witnessed the rise of dystopianism as its prevailing zeitgeist (Vieira, 2022).

Education has been a popular topic of utopian literature throughout the centuries, from Plato to Paulo Freire (Webb, 2022). Utopian thinking, speculative and social science fiction have also found their place in twenty-first-century education science. Macgilchrist et al. (2020) have speculated on how digital education might evolve in the coming decade given various scenarios. Selwyn et al. (2020) have employed "social science fiction" (see Lackey, 1994) to imagine what schools might be like in 2030 as a result of digitalization. Costello et al. (2022) have used speculative fiction as a narrative research method to imagine the role of books in the future.

The Digital Future of Education and the Rise of Official Document Utopias

Utopias have been used to imagine possible, desirable, states of things and societal orders of the future for centuries, in the treatises of philosophers, novelists, and intellectuals who have imagined better futures and means of governing society and people.[1] However, if we wish to locate where the currently powerful speculations and visions of the future are emerging, we will find them in surprising places, such as official vision documents and discussion papers by intergovernmental organizations (e.g., OECD, 2020; 2019; EU, 2020; Centeno et al., 2019; WEF & PwC, 2021; WEF, 2020; WEF & The Boston Consulting Group, 2015), national institutions (e.g., Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019), and multinational technology and consulting companies (e.g., Microsoft, 2018; Microsoft & McKinsey & Company, n.d.; Kenworthy & Kielstra, 2015).

These reports, discussion papers, and vision documents factualize and build a discursive truth within which the future and digitalization of education are described and thus imagined. They circulate a global discourse of digitalization and data-driven education, entwined with neoliberal ideology, which is increasingly colonizing educational discourse, local lifeworlds, and practices (Rizvi et al., 2022). We thus define these as "official document utopias," often developed for policymaking by armies of

consultants powered by a neoliberal worldview and its interests in what a desirable future would look like within its ideological framing (see Mannheim, 1954; Bauman, 2005).

Although realistic and deterministic, these documents contain similar features or techniques as past utopian literature. First, they begin by suggesting something is wrong with the current state of affairs. Second, they offer solutions or blueprints as to how the world could be better. And third, often explicitly, they define what is desirable or "better." Besides, the documents are based on a circular reasoning that the future is more uncertain than ever (an argument also used in the past), primarily due to technological disruption. And as the logic continues, education is essential in tackling this uncertainty. Still, they assert, because education is severely outdated, it first needs to be radically transformed with technology before teachers can use it to prepare students to be employable in the future.

As such, the documents as official utopias aim to ensure and manage the future with their sociotechnical and educational imaginaries (Rahm, 2021; see also Fairclough, 2013, p. 266) and can be regarded as utopias with their future-looking outlines, programs, and recommendations:

> All utopias are, by definition, fictions; unlike, say, historical writing, they deal with possible, not actual, worlds. To this extent they are like all forms of imaginative literature. They go further than conventional fiction in their extension of the bounds of the possible to include what to many may seem impossible or at least very improbable. Their fiction, that is, belongs more to the genre of science fiction than that of the conventional realist or naturalistic novel. But for all that, they remain in the world of fiction and share its main features. (Kumar, 2003, p. 69)

While the documents also claim to predict the future, they describe the latter as always uncertain and in the state of becoming. Consequently, these documents—widely circulated and affecting educational policies in different parts of the world—are actually playing a key part in producing the technology-oriented future they only claim to predict and describe. Furthermore, they resemble visions of "utopian engineering" (Popper, 2013, p. 151), similar to classical totalitarian utopias, which aimed to manage and revolutionize the whole of society (see also Bauman, 2003, p. 16).

Classical utopias and science fiction were usually written by individual authors and intellectuals (Kumar, 2003). This is where document utopias

differ: they are typically put together by officials, consultants, and experts and sometimes involve various "stakeholders" in co-creating and imagining the future. While co-creation workshops and similar events make the future appear democratically imagined, it does not necessarily mean the imagining was performed in entirely free acts of fancy. Indeed, it is always envisioned under specific rules of discourse: currently, for example, the "future megatrends," "technological disruptions," and "individuality." Moreover, the questions proposed in such workshops are often congruent with the current neoliberal paradigm infused with technological optimism and determinism: "How can digitalization help individuals to succeed in an unstable working life?" or "How can digitalization create new value and economic growth?" Besides being utopian, they also contain an ideological package in reproducing the neoliberal paradigm. As such, they are still not "transcending the existing order," but are "harmoniously integrated into the world-view characteristic of the period" (Mannheim, 1954, p. 174). They claim to be neutral and to provide "'value-free' knowledge to be applied onto society to engineer its development" (Žižek, 2008, p. 22).

Traditional utopias "promised the end to the toil," as Bauman (2005, p. 311) puts it. These are forward-looking utopias where the best of all worlds is yet to come. The official document utopias encapsulate "the dream of a toil never ending" in Bauman's words and have "moved the land of solutions and cures from the 'far away' into 'here and now'." " Instead of living towards the utopia," document utopias are "living inside the utopia" (Bauman, 2005, p. 311). They are lived here and now without the horizon of a better life. This presentism of the official document utopias manifests itself in the daily struggles of neoliberalism, in which people must run ever faster (without a goal or an end in sight) even in order to stay still. (Bauman, 2005; Traverso, 2016).[2]

Another major concern is that the rules of the discourse often go unnoticed in the present-day official document utopias. They limit our imagination and inhibit use of the local knowledge gained from daily life and the educational environments in which the digitalization of education is actualized. The often abstract utopia of the potential of digitalization thus becomes more real than its shortcomings witnessed in real life (see, e.g., Teräs et al., 2022; Mertala, 2020). The grand narrative of the document utopias overrides the local, contextual needs and knowledge.

Official document utopias can define what is realistic and unrealistic and, while doing so, turn it upside down. In their discursive universe of

truth, it appears practical to govern and manage people, society, and education with emerging technologies almost always on the verge of fulfilling their infinite potential. While proclaiming to imagine the future, these official documents have colonized the space for a utopian imagination, in addition to inviting everyone along to imagine their future, which is ultimately more of the present.

Participatory Imagination of the Future: Method of Empathy-Based Stories

When it comes to imagining and speculating on digital futures, we agree with Markham (Markham, 2021; Pronzato & Markham, 2023) that repeating discursive patterns of technological optimism and determinism works as a *discursive closure* that often limits the ways in which we can think, discuss, imagine and impact digital futures. Still, Markham remains hopeful that we can break the discourse of inevitability, the seemingly locked digital future, and the powerlessness we might experience in the face of it. They suggest we could achieve this with performative critical pedagogy and collaborative, iterative interventions with people acting as researchers drawing from their lived experience to develop their local practices (Markham, 2021). With this hope and vision, we also wish to locate the following approach in order to imagine genuinely alternative and, hopefully, better futures.

Eskelinen et al. (2020) state that there is "the need to recognize the open, dynamic and reflexive nature of utopias, and generally the need for utopian thought and horizons beyond the existing (liberal capitalist) social order" (p. 14). In what follows, we introduce a research methodology that utilizes peoples' lived experiences and imagination and can enhance our possibilities to envision alternative futures, namely the Method of Empathy-Based Stories (MEBS). Theoretically, it can be placed in the tradition of utopian thinking described above, except that MEBS is a bottom-up approach utilizing peoples' ideas and thus representing their *collective imagination*.

Methodologically speaking, MEBS is a participatory research method (Jungk & Müllert, 1987; Cumbo & Selwyn, 2022; Selwyn et al., 2020; Ryynänen & Rannikko, 2021; Eickhoff & Geffer, 2009). These make use of local, place-based knowledge and people's capacities to act both individually and as a collective. It is based on and develops people's reflective

abilities to build visions and imagine better futures that can eventually turn into reality.

Imagination is a vital capacity in order for human beings to flourish. It gives us something to strive for and "can generate new desires for change and help channel discontent into meaningful action" (Muldoon, 2022, p. 3–4). By using our imagination, we can fill in blanks, reconstruct, complete, or invent something (see Pateman, 1997). Ernst Bloch reminded us that the most tragic form of loss is that of the capacity to imagine that things could be different (Giroux, 2022, p. 21; Bloch, 2000). Using imagination, we can see an object or a situation as something else (e.g., an air brick as a pencil holder), manipulate the object in real or mental spaces, and change our point of view and the context of an object in our thinking and action (Pateman, 1997, p. 2).

But imagination can only bring us together to ponder future possibilities if we have the chance to use our imaginative powers. At best, the collective use of imagination can form an antidote to unreason or the work of what Henry Giroux has called neoliberal "disimagination machines." In his interpretation, these machines impose "forms of civic decay, moral irresponsibility, and political corruption while legitimating and rewarding ignorance, commodification, privatization, and crass selfishness over those values that generate trust, cooperation, critical thinking, compassion, social responsibility, and the common good" (Giroux, 2022, p. 27). As an approach that creates spaces of imagination, MEBS can provide an antidote to the decaying effects of disimagination machines.

The founding figure of the development of MEBS was Finnish social scientist Antti Eskola (1934–2018), who in the early 1980s was searching for a way out of the methodological impasses of positivism. As an answer to the critiques of both structural sociology and neopositivism, he developed MEBS. He defined humans as conscious, active beings who can take into account various laws and necessities of everyday life and thus control their lives. Consequently, people ought to be treated accordingly in the social sciences (Eskola, 1988). Harré and Secord (1972) had arrived at the same conclusion earlier and, ironically, used it to support their criticism of social psychological laboratory experiments (in which people are mistreated and deceived), calling for science to treat people as the human beings that they are.

The basic procedure of MEBS is relatively straightforward: research participants are given a frame story of a few sentences, and they are asked to empathize with the situation and write a short story of what has

happened before, how the case will proceed, or what will happen in the future. The writing session usually takes around 20 minutes, after which the researchers and the participants can share their experiences about the situation and the writing of their stories. The methodological trick is to vary one (or, in some instances, two or more) elements of the given frame story so that one half of the participants are given a slightly different version than the other half. In this way, the method produces differences in and varying accounts of the research theme.

In the 1980s, Eskola experimented with the method and concluded that it worked well for people of different ages and professions. In 1982, Eskola applied MEBS with athletes, psychologists, adult educators, social workers, and librarians to identify their fears for the future (see Eskola, 1988). He used three variations of frame stories in which the year is 1996 and, in the case of librarians, a group of interest to us, "an international congress of the world's biggest librarians' organization is due to be held" (Eskola, 1988, p. 293). In the first variation, the congress is arranged, "but it has to be broken off," and in the second, it was "decided that for several reasons the meeting might just as well be canceled." In the third variation, "everything goes smoothly and there are no disputes whatsoever.'" In all variations of frame stories, the participants were asked: "Why? What could have happened in the world and the field of librarians over these thirteen years?" (Eskola, 1988, p. 293).

Librarians emphasized technology in their stories as a problem and a threat to the future. The world congress needed to be canceled because the mainframe computer had broken down or been sabotaged. Computers seemed to have become an enemy; they and related technologies would dramatically change library work. The librarians expected computers to destroy the future of reading and printed culture and that publishers would only disseminate reprints of old classics. One librarian left the conference angrily and set up an underground organization to fight for books. Furthermore, they imagined that people would no longer visit libraries at all, interacting only with machines and eventually becoming separated and isolated because of the devices. Ultimately, there would no longer be a need for libraries or librarians in a world of digital machines (Eskola, 1988, p. 296; Eskola, 1984).

The methodological lesson of these early experiments was, first, that unlike in laboratory experiments or statistical research, it was essential to stay true to the participants' words, voices, and ideas; that is, what the various groups and individuals in these groups considered crucial to

themselves and their lives. Second, it was essential to respect these experiences—in the form of written stories—and build theoretical ideas from them together with theoretical concepts. After the first methodological experimentations in the 1980s, MEBS was further developed and used primarily in Finland (see Ikonen, 2013; Nishimura-Sahi et al., 2017; Särkelä & Suoranta, 2020; Wallin et al., 2018; Rytivaara et al., 2019).

Practices of Digitalization in Education in 2050

In our research project, we used MEBS with Finnish teacher students. They participated by writing about their ideas for the future of digitalization. We collected the data in the early spring of 2022 in a Finnish higher education institution. Half of the teacher students were given a frame story that painted a positive view of digitalization in education:

> We are living in the year 2050. The practices of digitalization in education have progressed considerably. From the teacher's point of view the situation is good in every way. Why? Imagine a situation and write a short story about it.

The other half of the teacher students were given a negative variation of the frame story:

> We are living in the year 2050. The practices of digitalization in education have progressed considerably. From the teacher's point of view the situation is bad in every way. Why? Imagine a situation and write a short story about it.

We collected the MEBS stories as part of a course lecture, a common procedure when using MEBS. The students first participated in a lecture, which was delivered online via an online meeting software. Its topic was digitalization and teacher agency, and the MEBS was presented to the students as a brainstorming activity following the lecture. As the session took place online, two Microsoft Forms questionnaires were prepared, each with either a positive or a negative frame story and space for the students to write their stories anonymously. The students were then randomly divided into two groups, facilitated by the breakout room function of the meeting software. At the beginning of the form, students were given information about the research, a data management plan, and the ability to either give or withdraw consent for the story to be used as research data. The students were then given 30 minutes to write and submit their

stories. After the preliminary analysis of the data, short narratives summarizing the most frequently appearing elements and scenarios were written and shared with the students on the course online platform. Although the students had the opportunity to comment on them, they did not do so.

The stories varied greatly in length and depth. Some were just a few sentences long, whereas others were written as full narratives with protagonists and milieus described in detail. However, even some terse and concise stories contained insightful and meaningful considerations about the future. It should be noted that the literary style and length of writing in MEBS does not necessarily correlate with the importance of the findings.

We identified two main approaches to the optimistic scenarios in the stories: techno-utopias and human wellbeing. The techno-utopias centered around technological development and science fiction-like devices that change how teachers work and interact with students. Technology was seen as a force that drove changes in society. The imagery and examples presented in these scenarios greatly resembled popular culture narratives familiar from science fiction, and they lacked elaboration on how exactly the technological innovation described had improved teachers' working conditions. These scenarios thus seem to repeat the logic of techno-scientific innovation inevitably equaling positive development, which has been critiqued by Birch et al. (2020). On the other hand, the stories that stressed wellbeing were more critical in nature. In these scenarios, the role of technology was subordinate to humans, and it was only used when it would bring a clear added value, such as freeing up a teacher's time for more important things such as meeting with students or enjoying a better work-life balance. In these future scenarios, technology was envisioned as invisible, user-friendly, and less prominent than today. Some stories even described conditions where technological development had taken a reverse turn, and the return to a simpler, technology-free environment had a positive impact on teachers' wellbeing.

In the negative future scenarios, human interaction was reduced, surveillance and bureaucracy increased, and teachers' work became ever more fragmented. Student numbers had skyrocketed, and they were no longer treated as human beings, but as mere student numbers and icons that appear in digital learning management systems. The teacher's work was reduced to that of a machine operator, whose task was to monitor and handle student data. Actual teaching was no longer needed as machines took care of that. Human interaction had become so rare that students no

longer developed social skills; in fact, they could no longer even produce facial expressions. Loneliness and social anxiety had become the norm.

Perhaps surprisingly, the basic logic of the stories appeared somewhat similar to Eskola's early experiments. In our study, the participating teachers feared that digital technology (e.g., the Internet and artificial intelligence) would make teachers redundant. This could indicate the sense of lost agency and autonomy in the postdigital world where various technological systems often impose their agency on us (Teräs et al., 2022; Roumbanis Viberg et al., 2021; see also, Jandrić & McLaren, 2020). Like Eskola's librarians, teachers also imagined that digitalization would disrupt genuine interaction between people. It is hard to say to what extent any of these concerns were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In any case, the stories were valuable in giving us insight into peoples' lifeworlds, fears, and hopes, even if on a rather abstract level. In addition, these results might show human reactions to technological changes as similar over different historical eras and in discourses addressing automation (see e.g., Volkov, 1967).

There are, of course, limits to the use of imagination, as Markham (2021) has described, for instance. In their interventions with researchers, artists, and activists that sought to develop a critical consciousness about digital futures, participants reached into the black box of digital platforms, but it was hard for them to find alternatives. The same could be said for our MEBS stories. However, we cannot attribute a possible lack of imagination to our participants—their ability to write and imagine—for we did not ask for future alternatives. Instead, we built our frame stories on the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" futures in the digitalization of education, which most probably guided the participants to assess the general conditions of the future of teaching practice.

By using different frame stories in this respect, MEBS could be thought of as a method that offers ideas, insights, and weak signals on a given phenomenon to inspire the imagination of researchers, and a first step in imagining the participatory and reflective development of postdigital discursive practices where digitalization is both ubiquitous and continuously transforming organizational structures, processes, and practices (see also Markham, 2021). The same holds true with the utopia tradition in general: "Utopian texts can be understood as heuristic tools for social imagination rather than 'architectural' blueprints for an ideal society" (Eskelinen et al., 2020, p. 7). In other words, by using MEBS we can, in a best-case

scenario, create experimental possibilities via open spaces and freedom that are not yet realized but already potentially in the world.

The question of whether MEBS produces mere stereotypes has already been discussed in the MEBS literature. As Eskola and Eskola (1995, p. 165) put it, the method undeniably produces stereotypes; on the other hand, stereotypes are also part of everyday life and, as social research methods tend to produce stereotypical representations of such, MEBS need be considered no different (Eskola & Eskola, 1995, p. 165).

In reading MEBS stories, we relate to what Levitas (2013) terms as the archeological mode of the utopian method, which "entails identifying these silences and interpolating the absent but implied elements—filling in, where possible, what is missing, or simply making evident the blank spaces" (p. 154). In addition, we consider the use of MEBS as part of the tradition of utopian pedagogy as defined by Webb (2022) is as follows:

> It is concerned with creating spaces for the exploration of desires, longings and hopes, and for drawing out utopian possibilities within concrete experience. It is a pedagogy of transformative hope; a pedagogy aimed at liberating the imagination as to the possibilities for systemic change. Utopian pedagogy is underpinned by a profound confidence in the capacity of human beings to construct (both imaginatively and materially) new ways of organizing life. It seeks to cultivate an awareness that human beings are self-organizing and self-determining historical agents and a confident belief in the transformative power of collective action. (p. 658)

Conclusion

The interpretive process should not stop at MEBS, but continue to imagine "real utopias," those not yet realized but feasible alternatives to the status quo (Wright, 2010; Särkelä & Suoranta, 2020). In this task, MEBS could be used (and is used in our research project)[3] as a starting point for deliberative discussions and emancipatory debates in future workshops (see Jungk & Müllert, 1987) between researchers and participants on concrete local-level postdigital futures; that is, to imagine peoples' work and study practices anew.

These imaginations can be connected to existing examples of digital practices such as Wikipedia and its sister projects, which are open digital platforms for anyone (with basic literacy and digital skills, a digital device, and an internet connection) to participate as thousands of volunteers have

done so far. Public libraries constitute another example that has offered print (and nowadays e-books) to read and study for free, thus increasing "equality in access to the material conditions necessary to live a flourishing life" (see Wright, 2013). These examples and people's—in our research project, higher education teachers'—imagination can lead to the developmental process of what Khasnabish (2012) has called radical imagination:

> Put simply, it is a process by which we collectively map 'what is,' narrate it as the result of 'what was,' and speculate on what 'might be.' It is both cognitive and corporeal and, rather than being necessarily spectacular or dramatic, it can be quite mundane. While the capacity to envision that which does not yet exist is obviously a human capacity, the radical imagination is also necessarily a collective process, something that arises out of dialogue and encounter rather than emerging fully formed from the mind of a gifted individual. (p. 228)

Thus, genuine engagements with participants are needed in imagining the viable and convivial digital futures of education. Moving on to the next step of utilizing and developing our *collective utopian and radical imagination* in future workshops requires us to be aware of the contradictions inherent in the dominant discourses and the preliminary thematic framework of digital futures based on written MEBS stories. This gives us the opportunity—to paraphrase Antonio Machado's words—to make the digital road by walking together.

The general task of critical research on the digitalization of education is to criticize current discursive practices in the digitalization of education and search for constructive alternatives. As James Muldoon (2022) puts it, "[i]t is strategically unsound to always be on the defensive, waiting to protest the latest round of capitalist tech innovation. We need to challenge the seeming inevitably of technological progress by putting forward our own vision of how tech should be designed and implemented" (p. 3). And, as he further points out:

> The technological determinism of our time increases the urgency for us to imagine different ways in which digital platforms could be organised. There are many existing accounts of what is wrong with Big Tech but few detailed proposals for how these problems should be addressed. (Muldoon, 2022, p. 3).

The collective and dialogical thought processes of MEBS can be valuable tools in building alternative and future scenarios to break the corporate-state hegemony of planning and implementing the future of digitalization in education. As Moisio and Rautiainen. (2020) have argued, existing "hegemonic ideologies change futures to eternal repetitions of the present" (p. 100). As such, they also degrade democracy if it is seen "not as a form of government, but a principle which can be applied to assess and develop existing practices and institutions, or to imagine completely new ones" (Eskelinen, 2020, p. 155). Genuine collective imagination can be seen as practicing democracy and breaking the existing hegemonic modes of thinking for a better world with democratic ideals (Eskelinen, 2020; see also Jandrić & McLaren, 2020). These ideals can also be seen as an important compass in our postdigital world when they steer us toward democratic waters instead of in the opposite direction. We therefore argue for a reflective and critical mindset regarding postdigital futures, rather than becoming seduced by the perpetual promises of technology (Marcuse, 2002). This is important for societal and ethical reasons such as democracy, equality, and environmental matters. As "the digital" is increasingly "post" in the lived experience, the social world, organizational structures, and processes, we might come to forget the link to environmental matters, increasingly believing that the new environmental and societal challenges emerging technologies always impose can be addressed merely with new and more efficient technologies, even if their impact is indeed deemed multistable and often unpredictable (Ihde, 2010). Such an overly positive and careless attitude might leave us with neat gadgets, but also with a scorched Earth (Crary, 2022)—an impossible equation of existence.

Notes

1. Imagining peoples' lives and the organization of the social world around them has been given various names, such as utopia (Levitas, 2013), speculative fiction (Atwood, 2011), speculative social science fiction (Lackey, 1994), science fiction (see, e.g., Freeman, 2000) and SF (Haraway, 2013). There is no consensus on the meaning and use of these terms, and quite often authors disagree on their use, such as of the term *utopia*. The terrain is thus diverse and sometimes conceptually confusing to say the least (Levitas, 2010; see also Sargent, 2010). Ordinary people have also envisioned their lives and destinies, but the products of their imaginations have vanished into the night of forgotten history and rarely been published;

Jacques Rancière's (1989, 2003) historical works on ordinary peoples' hopes and aspirations are an exception.

2. Enzo Traverso has interpreted this distinction and change in the meaning of utopia from the Marxist perspective as follows: "The Marxist vision of history implied a memorial prescription: we had to inscribe the events of the past in our historical consciousness in order to project ourselves into the future. It was a 'strategic' memory of past emancipatory struggles, a future-oriented memory. Today, the end of communism has broken this dialectic between past and future, and the eclipse of utopias engendered by our 'presentist' time has almost extinguished Marxist memory. The tension between past and future becomes a kind of 'negative,' mutilated dialectic." (Traverso, 2016, p. xiv.)
3. https://carde.group/research-projects

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