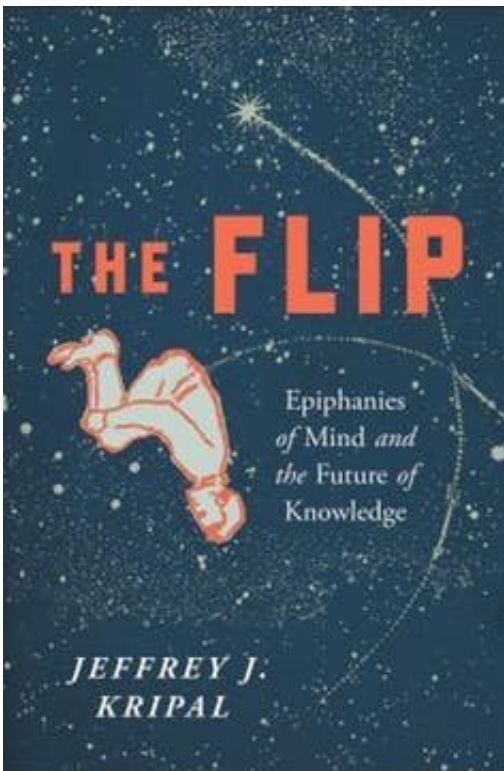


Teaching young people what really matters for the sake of our collective life on Earth

October 7 2019, by Richard C. Mitchell



‘The Flip’ by Jeffrey J. Kripal. Credit: Bellevue Literary Press

As young people pledge ongoing climate action following [a week of global mobilization](#), it's clear that the world [faces a collective existential climate crisis](#) signalling that we must shift [to a planetary perspective](#). But why it is that massive bodies of evidence are being ignored?

As a professor of child and youth studies who is dedicated to [fostering critical citizenship](#), and who examines how [different disciplines, knowledge systems and international charters protect young people's rights](#), I believe one problem is that learning and research approaches have become so forensically specialized. This is the case in both [school systems](#) and universities.

Transdisciplinary approaches

There is a 50 year-old reform movement that advocates transforming western educational institutions [to be more transdisciplinary](#): that means teaching in ways that help students learn not only small packets of information, but what really matters for the sake of our collective life on Earth.

Advocacy to reform education to be more holistic and cross-pollinating emerged in the early 1970s, simultaneously through Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget and Austrian astrophysicist Erich Jantsch. Each began discussing the notion [after attending a conference in France](#) that peered into planning for 21st century education.

In a public school setting, more holistic education might look like what Finnish schools do: As Finnish educator and researcher Pasi Sahlberg shares, Finland's curriculum emphasizes teaching children so they are able to "[combine the knowledge and skills learned in different disciplines to form meaningful wholes](#)."

Decolonizing learning

In schools, transdisciplinary approaches also means teaching the reality that [there are different ways of knowing](#). This is particularly relevant in colonial settler societies like Canada where Indigenous people have

resisted ongoing histories of enforced assimilation, domination and trauma—and where Traditional Knowledge is finally being more widely recognized as holding sophisticated insights and approaches.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission called people to hear with new ears, in order to allow themselves to be changed. While there are many initiatives to decolonize education in Canada, our school systems, like those of Britain, are [based on 18th century \(Eurocentric\) assumptions](#).

What's needed is telling difficult truths about our histories, seeking justice for injustices and changing the essentials of what we're offering young people. Public schooling needs to learn from approaches to education that Indigenous peoples have practised for millenia —getting out into the land, and speaking with Elders (lots!) to allow for development of the whole person.

We're missing flexible and related ways of thinking, and ways of organizing that foreground the centrality of interconnected relationships between all humans, beings, nature and our so-called school "subjects."

Hearing children and youth speak

[Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg's](#) and millions-strong recent climate strikes also suggest how our dominant western educational and developmental paradigms simply miss what is essential.

This phenomenal young woman has been recognized by the Nobel Academy with a 2019 nomination, although some defensive adult critics have [vilified her because of her Asperger's diagnosis](#) and suggested the teen's criticism of systems is invalid if she has no comprehensive solution.

By contrast, we can see another example of how a community acknowledges and respects a young person: [Autumn Peltier](#), from Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, is [Chief Water Commissioner with the Anishinabek Nation, a political advocacy body of 40 First Nations across Ontario](#). Peltier recently told an audience at United Nations headquarters in New York that "[we can't eat money, or drink oil](#)."

Why are politicians, corporate leaders and adults everywhere not urgently advocating changes to how societies are organized—based on the important voices of young people such as Thunberg and Peltier?

Mainstream understandings of what it means to be a child or youth appear to be inadequate to understand what these young people are doing or what they are about—or to take positive action as a result. How can our societies overcome this failure?

In universities

For the sake of the generations to come, universities as well as schools must find ways to take into full account the outrageous complexity of the 21st century. No critical problem—such as climate change or the urgent threat to water systems, or a crisis in sky-high levels of apprehending children into foster care—can be solved in silos.

As children all over the world are calling us out now, it is the job of adults—as educators, parents and politicians—to listen.

And, it's reasonable to reconsider how we've been led into a kind of mass hypnosis. What's needed is listening in radically new ways—with the ears of "children," so to speak, as beginners—in relationships where individuals and collective societies are respected, and in dialogue.

To respond to these urgent planetary problems that threaten young

people's futures, researchers in every field are tasked with contributing something relevant.

'Flipping' how we think

University researchers might learn something from the core assumptions of the body of thinking known as transdisciplinary thought over fifty years.

This thinking is based upon insights from quantum physics that [predictive measures based upon Newtonian physics and linear thinking cannot predict complex systems](#) such as weather, families or societies; it's also based on [respect and reverence for life](#).

Jeffrey Kripal, chair in philosophy and religious thought at Rice University, in Texas, argues for shifting our consciousness by rethinking how knowledge is produced and reintegrating humanities with the social and traditional sciences.

Kripal observes that much of the global ecological crisis "is driven by the rules of the game we play at this moment ... [and forms of knowledge that cannot be slotted into ... austere rules ... and \(the\) fetishization of quantity](#)."

His slim 2019 volume *The Flip —Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge*, was described as "mindblowing" by American journalist Michael Pollan. Pollan authored [How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression and Transcendence](#).

Embracing multiple ways of knowing through education and research is important among the many new approaches we'll need to honestly and respectfully face and care for the children and youth of the world —and

to imagine a collective future.

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