



Vipuvoimaa
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10 STATEMENTS ON CHOICE

1. Choosing is a possibility

Being aware of choosing means also being aware of the possibility to affect one's own future. The possibility of choosing, the ability to choose, precedes options, or the possibility of choice.

2. A choice is not the same as options

A choice is not exhausted by options – options are a prerequisite but not a sufficient condition. There are more choices than options – with our choice, we attach a new significance (e.g. meaningful outcome) to the available option and thus create a new option.

3. A choice is made in any case

As we act, we make choices all the time, and even not choosing is a choice to act in a certain way.

4. A choice is not a problem

Making a choice is not just a matter of knowledge or information, because the starting point for the decision-making process related to choosing is often an obscure feeling of difficulty or confusion, an unclear problem that needs to be solved.

5. A choice can have several contents

According to our research, *ambiguity* is a central characteristic of experiencing choices. It is not easy to determine what the end result of a choice will be. It thus seems that we make a choice on many different levels simultaneously: the matter in itself (for example education for education's sake), the matter in relation to another (education in relation to work), or the matter in relation to associations it evokes in us.

6. A choice has its limits

We are never able to choose the whole world. To be able to understand a choice, we must have an understanding of its limits. These limits are formed differently in the context of each choice, and they are affected by our previous experiences and conceptions of possible futures – in other words our position in the current field of choice. If we could choose anything, it would become impossible to make a choice – the freedom and difficulty of choice are proportional.

7. A choice includes a sacrifice

A true choice always includes awareness of a loss, because when a choice is made, something is always left unchosen. The awareness of a turning point and the possibility of having an effect also evoke the awareness of the necessity of sacrifice.

8. A choice is a message

A choice means taking a stand on what is valuable and desirable – by making a choice we reveal something about ourselves and our values to ourselves as well as to others.

9. A choice is about significance, not knowledge

In a world where knowledge is mobile and cheap, it is inevitably met by counter-knowledge. Knowledge that is not connected to one's personal experiences is often devoid of significance and can even feed confusion.

The difference between knowledge and significance is exemplified by the question: "Can we have knowledge of the future?" If knowledge is something that is created when information changes its recipient's conception of a matter, then we can have knowledge of the future. From the point of view of the future, then, knowledge is not based on truth or justification but significance.

10. The world is chosen

The possibility of choosing as the ability to influence one's own or the collective future lies somewhere between necessity and pure chance. If we stop to look around, what is the most interesting to people in the surrounding world is chosen, not necessity. It is also interesting how we separate what we can choose from what is given as a necessity, a kind of "fate", which we must in any case take into account. Choices create a background with which we can understand what is significant to us as individuals and as a community.

Time to choose

"The future is living according to my own choices in the coming years."



This is how an upper secondary school student summarised the matter when asked what the future is and what it means to them. The reply captures a confident outlook on the possibility of affecting one's own future through choices. The future is not only seen as the time from here on, but its optional and determinate content, or controllable resolution, is seen as significant.

Through choices, a person strives for or becomes something. The future is yet to be made decisions, but it is also a background against which different options are assessed. The optionality of future is always experienced here and now. This results in the future being open and not inevitable only if the present is open to alternate futures.

From the perspective of controlling one's own life, then, one must have the possibility of choosing, or awareness of being able to choose, as well as the possibility of choice, meaning valid choices. Because the awareness of ability to choose always precedes the possibility to choose, counselling choices is always about broadening the horizon of possibility and significance. This means creating a wider perspective and through it confidence to support personal choices.

Making a choice is not just a matter of knowledge or information, because the starting point for the decision-making process related to choosing is often an obscure feeling of difficulty or confusion, an unclear problem that needs to be solved. In a situation like this, even if you had all the knowledge available to you, it is possible that you do not know what you should choose. Knowledge without significance can even feed confusion.

Young people think that the future is open to be affected, at least at the personal level. The flipside of achieving a desired future is represented by a view according to which, for example, belief in Finland as a nation being able to affect its own future is not very strong. Even though the topmost feelings towards the future are confidence, happiness and optimism, the future that is outside one's own influence and its possible effects can cause fear or is ignored altogether.

The future is often thought of in the short rather than the long term. A year from now is already quite a long way into the future. In addition, it is more typical to think of one's personal future in relation to one's own goals, possible future events, future phases of life or what one sees as possible for oneself

than in relation to which uncontrollable factors might be affecting me. Events that can trigger thoughts about the future include financial matters, education, professional and career matters, everyday events, deviations from the usual life as well as family and friends.

In thinking about the future, people tend to rely on their own experiences, common sense and intuition.

Probabilities are a common way of handling different types of possibilities. However, this does not refer to mathematical probabilities but the logical and intuitive affirmation of possible situations and future occurrences. Thinking about the future is primarily aimed at dealing with one's dreams, gaining awareness and arranging one's own thoughts instead of producing clear plans. Thinking about the future is not seen as particularly hard, but more knowledge on the future is desired. In this case, however, knowledge means answers and not knowledge on the whole.

A veil leading to an open future

When the Koukku (smoothing post-secondary educational transitions) project was at its planning stage, a background hypothesis arose that there is a benevolent veil between a person making educational choices and the world containing different options.

This veil was used to portray the manifestation of the environment of choosing to the chooser in a way that can be a guide in the individual's decision-making.

Benevolence refers to the notion that this guidance is not seen to be consciously misleading or to be aiming at creating unfavourable choices. This assumption was made regardless of the awareness that counselling information and different kinds of guiding messages were affected by the personal interests and interpretations of the suppliers of such information.

A closer examination of the first hypothesis led to an interpretation according to which an individual's personal interests cannot unequivocally be placed as the guiding principle or rule of counselling, even though this can often be the case in single instances of counselling, for example between a student and a student counsellor. This challenged the researchers to take a look at the systemic nature of educational choices and counselling as well as the relationship this has with personal realities.

Loss of connection

When studying young people's thoughts on both realised and unrealised educational choices, the image of the guiding veil portrayed itself as continuously changing connections and communication between the inner world of the chooser and the surrounding outer world. An outside observer, in this case decision-makers or researchers, has only a limited access to the actual nature of said interaction.

This can easily lead to an outside observer having pronounced expectations that the young person is oriented towards long-term planning of the future. Most young people probably are, but there is good reason to assume that some are not. To them, the whole idea seems irrational.

When looking into the connections guiding choices, some of them are so closely connected to the everyday reality that they are seen as too self-evident to take into account. However, in everyday life, even small matters can have a significant influence on choices made. The single experiences of one's personal everyday reality can be difficult to express in generic sentences (such as 'education is always beneficial'), and unfortunately, what cannot be expressed in generic sentences is not significant at least from the point of view of control.

The weakness of generic sentences is highlighted in that we commonly do not really make choices often. A choice always has an owner.

When examining connections, it is central that we cannot choose what we do not know exists. In other words, the chooser must have a connection to the options and the goals for choices. For example, the choice for a place of education after primary school is most likely directed at the chooser's current immediate surroundings due to a special connection to the area caused by previous choices. Thus, the decision for vocational training is as much affected by the local availability of education, economic structure and expected future needs as it is by a person's image of what they want to do.

A choice can even be guided by a certain existing job, if it has special significance in the reality of the chooser, for example through parents, relatives or friends. On the other hand, if the individual does not have a socially affirmed connection of experience to the job in question, their point of view is one of an outsider. A connection based on definitions and assumptions is typical for an outside perspective. In this type of interaction, significance is formal in nature; from the outside perspective, attention is directed away from the everyday reality, where the possible job – such as a factory – is not significantly present. Even an individual who has a connection of experience to the reality is faced by a formal connection for example when watching a news broadcast on industrial layoffs and the closing down of factories. These news, however, are balanced by knowledge from the everyday reality that acts as a framework for the general facts conveyed in the news.

As an environment of choosing, the present or the past are not similar to us, and thus the plans and projects of the future differ from one another depending on their owner, the chooser.

An example of the significance of old connections in guiding choices as well as the forming of new connections is the division of vocational education by gender. The division into female and male dominated professions remains strong in the Finnish society, although it is more common now than 30 years ago to see women in a male-dominated field. The past 20 years have also given rise to significant changes or even the reversal of gender roles in some fields. This is a sign of a type of change where both the possibility of choosing (I can choose) and the possibility of choice (options) have increased.

According to the Koukku study, interest is highlighted in the educational choices of young people. The wider consequences of choice, such as employment, are not necessarily considered much. This conclusion is very understandable from the point of view of the youth; why would the society, after nine years of primary education or even secondary education offer educational choices that produce capabilities with no future demand? The existence of this kind of non-work-based educational availability seems especially odd against a societal discourse focusing on work as the most important way of participating in the society – as a prerequisite for individual and communal welfare.

From the point of view of the individual, it is relatively easy to arrive at the following deduction; if the society invests public funds into education and supports the education of individuals, there must be other factors behind it than the improvement of general knowledge, even if this is one of the cornerstones of education.

The question is ultimately about whether young people making educational choices should be more aware of what should be chosen in addition to what they want to choose? To what extent can they rely on the validity of choices offered by the society and to what extent should they question both the overall validity of available choices as well as their validity to them personally?

The right wrong choice

Another matter that sparked interest at the very beginning of the project was the problem of wrong choices. The open question of *“why do young people make wrong choices for example by getting an education in a field with no work?”* seemed real and justified at least from the point of view of the society. On the other hand, if this is the case, other valid questions would include *“why do you not give better counselling?”* or *“why does the educational system offer wrong choices to be chosen?”* The question of wrong choices is wrong to begin with, because the possibility of making a “wrong choice” is a prerequisite for the possibility of choosing. Our ability to choose and thus influence matters offers the possibility for both right and wrong choices.

In current theories on decision-making, there is an established view that no optimal solution exists. A complementary view on the problem of right and wrong choices arises from a different kind of systemic inspection. In this type of inspection, right choices that are rational and justified from the individual’s point of view produce unfavourable consequences and can thus be seen as wrong choices from the systemic point of view. This situation can, for example, be compared to environmental pollution. It is a false conclusion to assume that anyone would actually have chosen such matters as eutrophication or climate change, even though these can be proven to be consequences of human decisions. Justifications for choices that cause environmental pollution or other kind of harm can in fact be good – such as welfare, work or living standards. This example portrays the inevitability of the systemic – and chronologically more wide-ranging – view in better understanding phenomena related to choices.

The situation is excellent if the problem is a lack of planning

The third – and perhaps the greatest – question in educational choices has to do with where our goals and values ultimately come from. This is a central issue, as values determining goals are (technically) a prerequisite for planning.

In practice, the problem of educational choices lies in people not knowing what they want, or *“not wanting what someone else knows”*, and are thus irritated by a student counsellor telling them to do what they want. The problem manifests as vague goal setting: wanting to “fulfil oneself”, “learn continuously” etc. These are not goals or values but reflections of cultural individualisation and the disintegration of common values. One explanation for this could be individualisation (freedom to make choices) as a cultural framework of our time; it is devoid of content, unlike the previous package solution of owned apartment, steady job and family.

During the decades of economic growth both education and corresponding work was available. The availability of education and work enabled increasing wealth for people moving from the countryside to cities, breaking away from the agrarian and adhering to the industrial society. At the same time, moving from the countryside to cities meant an overall change in living environment as well as distancing oneself from the support and supervision of family and neighbours. Wealth gained through paid work was converted into real-estate. The society of paid work offered a package deal: steady paid work, which meant savings that could be used to buy a house where one could raise children within a nuclear family.

Education no longer straightforwardly guarantees social ascent for the simple reason that young people’s parents are already quite well educated. For a city youth whose parents have secondary level or higher education, education might not be seen as an automatically desirable route to social ascent and new experiences. In fact, nothing is seen as automatically desirable. Through new media, childhood experiences include whole new worlds: the world of games, films, books and international news. Countless possible models for living and desirability are available. In principle the world is open, but the cacophony of possible values and goals can also be crippling. In the market economy, withdrawing into selfish hedonism is an easy choice to make – the marketing of hedonistic self-realisation is just what many actors

in the society base their actions on. The problem is not the lack of planning when the surrounding unpredictable society raises the question: “why plan when you do not know what is desirable or permanent?”



Fulfilling the promise of counselling

It is important to people to give matters an understandable, structured form and meaning. This is a matter of giving significance: what ultimately makes something interesting or desirable to us as individuals or communities. The requirement of giving significance affects both the matters of one’s personal inner world as well as the foreign powers of the surrounding outside world.

Without conception of one’s own values and goals, planning for the future (how to get there) is both irrational and impossible.

Reflection on one’s own values and goals is work that has no place in the current educational system, which has not fully understood the pronounced need for such reflection in a society of permanent change and multiple values. The crucial question is not “what will I be when I grow up”, because no one will only become one thing and few even dare to admit to growing up. Final definitions are short cuts for thinking that are used to go around a problem by predefining the solution.

A better way to express the same matter would be to ask how I can participate in the society in a mutually beneficial way. *In all its personality, an educational or career choice is about participation, or finding something that others can also see as valuable.* It is currently not possible to pose this question in our educational system, where most young people are schooled for at least 12 years. Even posing the question is but the first step; the next one would be to find time to deal with it.

Time is needed for two reasons. Firstly, time is needed for actively reflecting on one’s own future as a part of the society alone and together. As important is the simultaneous passing of time. A personal future cannot be reconciled in a week or even a month. The question must first be posed, but it must also be given time to take root. If the question is formed correctly, it can help see the world in a new way. Only connectedness to one’s individual and wider societal future enables observance of patterns in seemingly insignificant and continuously changing pieces of information that can be of importance for one’s future.

Tools for work

The most important contribution of the KOUKKU project is the tools that have been developed to support the future work of young people. The principles guiding the development of these tools come from the idea that thinking about the future is challenging, time-consuming and hard work, but at best it can also be fun and rewarding. The basis of our tools can be summarised in three principles: *process, gamification and equality.* We believe that the future cannot be solved, but we must work for it – the efficiency of this work is multiplied with the right tools.

The process principle means that the future can never be completely solved. The most important matter is to reflect on the future from many sides. A future-oriented attitude enables finding and processing significant pieces from the surrounding flow of information. Of our tools, *HUPS (personal career planning)* fulfils the needs of the future process. During HUPS, a process facilitated by the student counsellor is used to reflect both alone and together on the relationship between the possibility of choosing – being able to choose – and the possibility of choice – having options to choose from. The goal of the HUPS is to create a wider understanding to support young people’s choices and decision-making by giving significance to both made and yet to be made choices.

The gamification principle is based on the idea that grew during the project, according to which especially complicated phenomena can be learnt better through games. This principle has been adopted most closely in planning the *“Small big choices” card game*. The card game enables playing through and experiencing many kinds of careers. The game helps for its part in orienting towards the future and makes it easier to start making choices.

The equality principle stems from our understanding that, even in this age of personal and individual career paths, the problem of the future is mutual and thus best processed together with others facing the same situation. The principle of equality runs through all of our tools. It is especially prominent in our *“Adventure in the fog” game*, where young people can go on an adventure through different kinds of futures. At the end, the experience is discussed together, and the young people can think about what kinds of effects their own choices had, what kinds of roles were available as well as how their own choices and possible roles were interconnected during the game.

The philosophy of the Koukku project can be summarised as follows: guidance is everywhere and everyone’s business – even the youth themselves. In a world, where everything guides you, new methods and tools are needed for counselling.