

ENHANCING THINKING AND CREATIVITY WITH FUTURES STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

Smokestacks versus satellites—the slowly fading uniformity of a mass society and the emerging information society with its unprecedented diversity of choices. These emerging options will continue to redefine day-to-day life. The ultimate winners or losers, our children, will spend their adulthood in a society difficult for most of us to recognize.

Futures Studies is really a course in developing one's thinking skills and creativity. The "futures" element focuses a student's skills and abilities on several open-ended issues which will be resolved in the future. Most, if not all, of these issues are certain to influence our personal and mutual futures. Not only do students of futures studies sharpen their thinking skills and creative abilities but they also become more aware of, and familiar with, possible futures—the student becomes more "futures-friendly." What is "future friendly"? An analogy would be a situation in which you were driving a car at night on a darkened road with no lights. Moving into the future, "without your lights on," darkens the future and makes many occurrences a surprise to which you can only react. With your lights on you are better able to make the needed adjustments sooner, and more important, plan your overall course better. That is "futures friendly"—awareness of options and proacting to create and shape your future.

Regardless of what evolves from the current educational reform movement in the United States, we are at a point where our schools must find a balance in their approach for educating today's students for tomorrow. A balance between the degree of: 1) individualization and standardization of curriculum offered, 2) the specificity and generality of information presented, 3) the variety and routine of classroom activities presented, 4) the breadth and depth of material covered, and finally, 5) a balance between the creativity and conservation promoted in approaching and successfully creating a perspective on one's own future. The study of alternative futures can help curricular and instructional practices become more updated and more suitable for education's most basic purpose: preparing individuals for the future. Increasing numbers of schools are using futures studies as a thematic framework, through which several content areas may find a commonality and a new emphasis. Futures constitutes a ready-made topical and thematic area for revitalizing curriculum. The flexible thinking skills and creative abilities gained through such studies focus on exactly the type of skills needed by "citizens of the future."

With all the ambiguity about the future, there are two things we know. First, we know change is predicted as a long-range constant. There is little doubt our country, indeed our world, continues to enter a new era—an era without precedent. The individual with: 1) knowledge about change and how to cope with it, 2) flexibility in his or her thinking and attitudes, and 3) effective problem-solving skills will be at a *distinct advantage*.

The second thing we know about the future is: when a school has no vision of the future, it teaches the past. This is perhaps the sixth element of the balance needs mentioned above. School districts across this country need to balance "the vision" given to students through the curriculum, so that it reflects not only where we have been and currently are, but where we could possibly be going as a nation and world. Futures studies is not the end all, be all. However, futures studies does have cognitive and affective elements which are becoming more and more important to students trying to understand themselves, their world, and more fully realize future possibilities which will impact on both—a skill of critical import during times of rapid change.

SECTION I

BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES: THE REASON BEHIND IT ALL

Behavioral outcomes, the ultimate intent of any intervention or curriculum, is the overall goal of this model. For students to understand better who they are, how the world works, and how possible futures will affect both, is a major step. The other part of this important understanding is to put the new information into action, or new behavioral patterns. To “act” like they know: 1) the actions they take now will affect the future, 2) there are many different futures available, and 3) it is better to shape the future than have it shape you.

All three components of the model combine to enhance the development of skills, attitudes, and flexibility of thinking necessary in the future. The development of more positive and sophisticated, yet realistic, attitudes toward the future is a primary goal. The learning of skills and processes allowing students to shape their future rather than being shaped by it, and learning how to learn in an information age, are also primary outcomes. The goals and objectives later in this section specify the full intent and scope of futures studies.

The Connection Between Student Motivation and Time Orientation

High drop-out rates and low standardized test scores are two problems facing our public school system that give rise to the fear of America will be left behind in the early 21st Century. To better understand why some students achieve to their potential in school and other students fail to do so, educators must examine the connection between the students’ time orientation and their resultant levels of motivation. Three basic time orientations exist: past, present, and future. The term time-orientation indicates where an individual images, or sees, him or herself in a temporal sense, and therefore, where they primarily live in time. An individual’s time orientation is the result of cultural influence, socio-economic status, educational level, and age. It can change from time to time but one of the three: past-present-future, represents where an individual primarily “lives in time.”

We’ve all heard of individuals who live in the past. Often, this situation reflects a feeling that the best future has already happened. If one’s time orientation is toward the past, how does that affect his or her present motivation level(s)? What ramifications does living in the past have in preparing for the future? Would one who lives primarily in the past make plans for a career change or seek further education for some other specific personal goal? Does a person who lives in the past generate any meaningful personal goals oriented toward the future?

Living in the present also has implications for the other two dimensions of time and one’s level of motivation. When one lives in the present, with little or no regard for the past or future, plans are all but non-existent. Of the three time orientations, living in the present has the most narrow focus, ranging from a fleeting second to, at most, a few days. More than a few days calls for some degree of planning, indicating the individual is no longer living in the present but also the future.

Within American society there are groups who live only in the present. The poor, the black, and certain immigrant groups are characterized in this way and do, in fact, operate on a time system different from that of the American mainstream. This is reflected in differing attitudes toward punctuality and personal planning. (Singer, 1974) In the most dire situations, the hopelessness and despair of disadvantaged groups in American society lead to a type of timelessness in which the past and future are discounted and the present is the only known. In situations where the deprived are faced with a future that is uncertain, the present expands. Frequently, fate rather than the setting of personal goals and developing