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INTRODUCTION

Futures Studies: Exploring New Horizons

Futures studies and research is nothing new. Individuals and agencies with a need to plan strategically for the future have been “doing futures” for decades. From the Rand Corporation to the Department of Defense, from your local traffic department to the public utilities, there is a need to: 1) forecast various possibilities, 2) generate alternative courses of action based on the forecasts, and 3) solve the existing problems.

What is new is that futures studies and research are entering educational curriculum. From universities to elementary schools, innovative courses are encouraging students both to discover and to invent the future by actively examining future possibilities and options. The students gain three significant benefits: 1) They are less likely to be totally surprised by future occurrences and thus more likely to shape their future rather than only react to it, 2) they learn thinking processes and research skills which will be valuable throughout life, and 3) they learn to think and perceive the future in a flexible way, an essential ability in times of rapid change.

Because of certain learning characteristics and sensitivities to real world situations, the gifted students seem to excel in futures studies. “They sense the significance of problems and solve problems of which others may not even be aware. They deal with concepts and ideas and produce creatively at greatly advanced levels and should be encouraged to do so” (Martinson, 1974).

However, the gifted student has a rather mixed blessing with regard to examining the future. Many individuals can identify a problem but the next step, generating possible solutions, is a more difficult task which requires a more sophisticated employment of higher level thinking skills. The mind’s ability to generate a large number of solution-oriented responses rather than problem-oriented responses is an ability of great value. In a study comparing gifted versus non-gifted students’ thoughts about the future, two significant findings emerged. When compared to non-gifted students, the gifted identified themselves to be more pessimistic toward the future and were shown to respond more negatively to future issues of pollution, schools and crime. In addition, . . . gifted students produced significantly more solution-oriented responses” (George & Gallagher, 1978).

A student, who is plagued by pessimism and negative perspectives of the future, is hampered. A student, who has the ability to generate the solutions needed to imagine a more preferable future, has far fewer limits on his or her ability to generate ideas and develop creative potential.

Giftedness is more a promise than a fact; it must be continually nurtured for its fullest development. As parents and educators, we need to insure that promising minds are given an opportunity to explore future possibilities and develop the much needed process abilities of generating alternatives and options.

This book is designed as a tool to unlock all students’ (not just the gifted) abilities and visualize a better future for all. One fact about the future is known: change is predicted as a long-range constant. Another complementing fact is known: few phenomena can be as debilitating as rapid, unrelenting change. If we are to fare better in the future, we must acquire skills and abilities which allow us to examine different future futures.

SECTION I

Why Study The Future?

“In the future, it is not that we will want less, but if the experts are right, we will accept less, because we have no choice. Our desires are constant. Reality changes.”

Lloyd Dobyns, NBC Nightly News.

The Concept Of Change

Time and change . . . the more change you fit into time, the more information emerges. The more information available, the more knowledge extracted. The more knowledge extracted, the more change. The faster the information and resultant knowledge is created, the faster the change . . . and so it goes. This understanding goes to the heart of what futurist Alvin Toffler identifies as the source of “future shock.” The accelerating rate of change, which is remolding many of our ideas about future possibilities and precipitating fundamental shifts in our society and world is unprecedented. As a result, the need for skills and processes which help us cope with change is also unprecedented.

As a society becomes more interested in the future the society begins to change. The changes are subtle at first. Attitudes begin to shift. As the rate of change increases we find that traditional methods of adjustment no longer seem to work. There are too many issues or situations without precedent, without a known “fix.” In this situation of accelerating change, we come to realize that what worked in the past has decreasing relevance to the problems of a new, more complex age. It becomes imperative that we shift our frame of reference toward future possibilities or become lost in the malaise. Successful solutions in the past were well-matched to the problems then at hand. Today, we need forward-looking, anticipatory, and creative approaches to examining and solving our future problems. Our current situation is more complex and frequently offers less time in which to effect a solution. All of this requires new perspectives on, and attitudes toward, the future.

One example of these new perspectives is oriented toward considering all stakeholders. In any given problem, a number of different stakeholders might benefit or suffer from solutions to various problems. Because we find ourselves increasingly connected to each others’ lives, it becomes more important daily to consider all the ramifications of both the problem and its possible solutions. The solution to the problem will affect the different stakeholders in different ways, sometimes by design, sometimes by unintended and unexamined side-effects.

The Role Of Education

Many of the jobs and careers, in which today’s students will engage, have not even been created. Teachers and guidance counselors are realizing that their ability to characterize the future and lay out alternatives for the student is of increasing importance, primarily because job market and career options are evolving so quickly.

It is difficult to train students for employment which does not yet exist. Still, there are certain elements which, if included in the child’s education, would better equip him or her to succeed in a quickly changing future. “Tomorrow’s illiterate will not be the man who cannot read, he

will be the man who has not learned how to learn.” (Herbert Gerjuoy as quoted in *Future Shock*, 1970, p. 414)

With the stakes so high and with change projected as a long-range constant, the need for students to be involved with the processes inherent in futures studies is becoming a necessary and critical element of the educational process. As a wise observer once noted: it is easier to build kids than to repair adults.

Futures studies has a number of different labels, but primarily it builds attitudes toward, and perspectives on, the future. The over-reaching goal of formal schooling is to prepare students for the future. Education then sets out to delineate the future so we have an idea of what formal schooling should prepare the student to meet.

The primary method used by education to delineate “the future” is known as *trend extrapolation*. The premise upon which trend extrapolation operates is one of simple, linear extension of current trends into the future . . . “tomorrow won’t be terribly different from today.” It is a forecasting methodology which is useful in determining short-term possibilities. There is one inherent problem with the use of trend extrapolation. If this short-term methodology is extended too far into the future, the probability increases dramatically that some variable will emerge and render the forecast worthless.

Herein lies the problem. Education uses a simple, linear extension of the present to represent the future for which we are to train students. Today, more than any other time in history, situations, issues, and events may occur so quickly and without warning that the use of trend extrapolation, or anything like it, is dangerously short-sighted. The student who enters kindergarten in the fall of 1988 will graduate from high school in 2001. How will the world of work be in 2001? How will the *world* be in 2001? A lot like today?

If, for whatever reason, educators do not or cannot successfully foresee the probable future and prepare students for it, then they betray an entire generation of youth. It is akin to a misfilled prescription; your expectations for relief, based on what is stated on the label, is not what is actually delivered. However, something is delivered which was not on the label or even bargained for. By training students for a future which will not exist, we are wasting time and resources. The ultimate losers, today’s youth, will spend a part of their lives simply trying to understand something for which formal education should have prepared them.

If school cannot deliver the information and skills needed for a student to formulate a positive and sophisticated view of the future, then the student formulates a view of world-in-the-future based on other sources. It is well known that many individuals get most of their understanding of current affairs through the televised news reports. In this situation, Dan Rather has, on a slow day, approximately 100 seconds to tell us what is going on in the Middle East or why thousands of people are starving in East Africa.

The context in which these problems exist is often lost as we are exposed to fairly graphic, emotion-wrenching film clips. We hear little about the underlying religious differences in the Middle East which are thousands of years old and continually fueling the conflict in that area. Also, we don’t hear much about the combined abuses of nature and man which have led to the environmental systems breakdown in East Africa and are directly responsible for so much human misery. Without the context in which the events occur, one can develop a warped view and understanding of what is happening and why. Because of this lack of meaningful context, proposed solutions can actually cause more harm than good. Any student of the Creative Problem Solving process knows if you don’t have an adequate understanding of the problem, you cannot develop an adequate long-term solution.

Another fact of news reporting which we must acknowledge is that good news is very rarely reported. For whatever reasons, good news doesn’t sell well. A combination of these two news