

Preparing Students for the Future by Actually *Teaching* about the Future

AAIE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

February 6 – 9, 2014



**Eyes on the Future:
Future Trends and Foresight Education**

Peter Bishop, PhD

Houston TX

Introduction

Yesterday you heard a challenging talk from Jack Uldrich about the future in general and the future of education in particular. This talk has the same words in the title – future and education, but it’s not the future of education. Rather it’s futures or foresight education – namely, educating our students about the future. Both are important, but I am an educator, and I have been a foresight educator for the last 30 years. So I am here to persuade you to start teaching your students about the future.

I officially retired from the graduate program in Foresight at the University of Houston in August. As a result, I now have more time to spend on something that I have been doing on the side for a number of years—namely introducing futures thinking to the “rest of education.” Most of you are in “the rest of education”—doing excellent work for students every day, but generally not teaching them about the future.

I have a lot to talk about here so let me lay out an agenda –

1. Why teach the future?
2. Why teach the future at this time in history? What is about today that makes teaching the future timely or even necessary?
3. Why don’t we teach the future today? (There are many good reasons!)
4. What have I and others already done to teach the future to their students?
5. What is to be done next?

And we will include with some time for questions, objections, suggestions and general discussion.

1. Why teach the future?

The argument for teaching the future is so obvious, even compelling, that it is hard to articulate. Which world will our students be living in as adults—Past? Present? Future? That world will be different from the present and even more different from the past in many, significant ways. Should we not be preparing our students for those differences? It is like preparing people to enter the foreign service or even to come teach in an international schools without telling them which country or which school they will be going to. We can talk in general about differences in climate, language, food, customs, but never get specific about which climate, language, food or customs they will actually be experiencing.

Is the analogy valid? One objection might be that, compared to knowing about the future, we know the language and culture of a specific place because people are already there. We cannot know the future in the same way because no one has been there yet. That is a very important objection, and one that I will get to in a few moments. For now, let me turn to the second point on the agenda, why it is more important than ever to teach the future now?

2. Why teach the future now?

One of the perspectives that comes from taking the future seriously is a different perspective on the present. We study history, lots of it, which we should. In that study, we come across different times from our own, different eras in the story of human civilization. So we learn about the ancient worlds of Egypt, China, Greece and Rome, the Catholic Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe all the way up to the World War II and the Cold War, if we get that far.

We fail to recognize, however, that we are also an era, a chapter in that same story of human civilization. We do not think of it that way because the historians of the future have not told us what our era is, how it will end, and what it is leading to. But they will have answers to all those questions eventually, and they will teach those answers to our great grandchildren and our descendants many centuries from now. Will it be the Era of the Internet, the Era of Globalization, the Era of Terrorism, the Era of Climate Change? We do not know. It could be any or all of those. As we know, the past is usually more complex than our labels allow.

But one aspect of our era that I am committing myself to is to establish a new, more systematic way of dealing with the future. All intellectual disciplines, indeed all paradigms, were invented at a particular place and time by one or people in that era. So history as we know it today was invented in 5th century Greece. Prior to that history was myth and legend, a way to educate and socialize a people by telling and re-telling ancient stories. Herodotus and Thucydides saw it differently. They described the past as it actually happened and thereby literally invented history. A number of us trying to do the same thing today by inventing the new intellectual of strategic foresight.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of our era, however, will certainly be the increasing rate of change. We did not invent change. The switch from hunting-gathering to agricultural societies was change; the introduction of literacy to the Renaissance was change; the appearance of democracy was change. However, those changes took a long time, generally longer than a lifetime. As a result, people generally lived and died in the same society they were born into. Except in a few cases, their preparation for their world was good throughout their life.

Not so, in our world. Change is occurring at a speed today that means we experience significant shocks many times in one life. We are regularly asked to give up obsolete ideas and practices in order to adapt. We have to learn anew, not just fall back on what we were taught.

Frankly, I was initially skeptical of this “increasing rate of change” idea when I first became a futurist. I thought it was more a matter of perspective, that things up close look like they are changing faster than things far away. So we swim in the 24-hour news cycle. But what happened in the Renaissance or the 17th century? Some things for sure, but nothing as momentous as iPhone 5!

Eventually, however, I had to agree that the pace of change had quickened. Economies developed faster. The UK took 160 years to double its GDP for the first time; the U.S. took 60 years; China took 10. Products are adopted faster – the telephone, the radio, the television compared to the Internet and the cell phone. Ideas travel farther and faster, colliding and recombining to fuel the innovation that drives change. So we live in a world that is changing faster than the world of our parents and grandparents, and should these conditions continue, it will change even faster for our children and our grandchildren.

So we live in a different, if not unique historical period, and we should adapt to the needs of that period for the sake of our children.

3. Then why don't we teach the future today?

There are many good reasons!

- First of all, it is not required by any state's curriculum standards, including the IB and the emerging Common Core Curriculum. There are a lot of standards already. One person estimated that it would take another 12 years of schooling to teach the all. So we don't have room in the curriculum to teach the future. Except that I did learn, just this morning, that the College Board is considering including foresight in its standards for the SAT, AP and other examinations. That is wonderful, a step along the way!
- Secondly, the future is unpredictable. How can we know, much less teach, something that has not happened yet?
- Finally (and there are many more reasons) is that we were not taught the future so we do not know how to teach it. Schools and teachers are inherently conservative. They only teach what they know. As professionals, they take care not to teach something that is marginal or perhaps even wrong.

So, as I said. Many good reasons. Let me take them one at time –

1. We do not have time to teach the future.

Actually I agree with this one. Schools are burdened, not only with endless curriculum demands, but with the requirement to solve all the other problems that children have in society today – character development, hunger, drugs, sexual behavior, etc. Schools cannot possibly add another course in order to teach the future.

And they don't have to. We can teach the future in any subject within the existing curriculum –

- Social studies, of course, like government or economics. How are these institutions changing and what might they look like in 20 years?
- History – what did past generations think of the future? We know the end of their story, like the Founding of the Republic, the Civil War, and the Great Depression, but they didn't. What did they hope would happen? What were they afraid would happen? What images did they have of the future?
- History again – what would have happened if...
 - Washington had not escaped the British in the Battle of Brooklyn?
 - Abraham Lincoln had lost the election of 1860?
 - Lee Harvey Oswald had missed in trying to kill President Kennedy?
 - The FBI had stopped the 9-11 terrorists before they destroyed the World Trade Center?

No one knows the answer to these questions. In fact, they have no answers in the traditional sense. But shouldn't students understand that the past is not determined, that it is contingent on things that did not have to turn out the way they did.

- Literature – science fiction, of course, or perhaps stories about alternative presents. Stopping a story midway or at the end and asking, “What is going to happen next? What are the possibilities?” (My daughter, who teaches middle school language arts in California, says that good reading teachers do that already. Good for them because they are preparing students to think contingently about the future.)
- Science – What scientific developments are in research or development? How will those developments change the world for the students and their children? Which ones do the students like or not like, and why?
- Math – That’s easy: finding time series data on the Internet, measuring change over time, extrapolating trends into the future.

It doesn’t take any more time to teach what we want to teach using the future compared to using the past or the present.

2. The future is unpredictable.

Again, agreed. There is too much complexity and uncertainty to know what will happen exactly. But do we have to know the exact answer about the future to discuss it intelligently? Here is where futures studies differs from traditional forecasting. The many thousands of traditional forecasters are trying to predict that one future that will occur. For economists, market researchers, political pundits, accuracy is their primary concern. They don’t do very well, actually, but they keep on trying.

We futurists take a different approach. We don’t predict the future. We realize that getting the future “right” is futile. So we see the future, not as a single prediction that *will* occur, but rather as many scenarios that *could* occur. Listen to the change in the verb – *will*, what the English teachers call the indicative mood, the mood of fact, vs *could*, the language of possibility. That is a profound difference. Futurists think of the future as a set of plausible futures rather as one future that is “right” and the rest that are “wrong.”

We develop those futures in scenarios, stories about how the future could emerge, based on a disciplined use of imagination –

- Imagination because a truly different future can only be conceived in the imagination, not simply as the result of logical analysis.
- Discipline because a well-grounded future requires some evidence to suggest that such a future could plausibly occur.

There is no time this morning to go into our theory of forecasting, but I can say that we have graduated over 300 professionals over the last 40 years, many of whom are employing these techniques in business, government and the civil sector to help people better anticipate and influence change. And more organizations embracing this approach the future every year. Should we not start introducing this to our students while they are still learning?

3. We do not know how to teach the future because we were never taught.

Agreed, again – a trifecta! I got all the education that American society could offer. An excellent high school and college education from the Jesuits and graduate degrees in sociology from one of the top universities in the country. Yet few teachers talked about change; and as far as I can remember, none mentioned the future. I read Marshall McLuhan, Alvin Toffler, Paul Ehrlich, Donella Meadows and a host of science fiction, but none of that was for school. I went into sociology to study social change, which I did in my thesis and my dissertation, but there was not even one class on social change in my department.

But that fact is also beginning to change. There are now between a half dozen and dozen graduate degrees in futures studies around the world and three in the U.S. Still tiny, but many more than the two that existed in the 1970s. There are professional seminars, the UH Certificate in Strategic Foresight and others, that are introducing professionals to these concepts. We have conducted some in-service classes for teachers in the Houston area, and we have an annual in-service for teachers in American schools around the world sponsored by the State Department's Office of Overseas Schools. It is still tiny, but that is where Teach the Future comes in. But more of that later.

4. How can we teach the future to our students?

We have a whole Master's degree on foresight at the University of Houston, but I cannot go into any detail here. I can tell you, however, that I taught a course on the Future of Houston at a private school in Houston last semester, my first high school class since 1969! The course culminated in a presentation to the Center for Houston's Future which was a great success and which led to an article in the *Houston Chronicle* entitled, "What does the future hold for Houston," that appeared on the first Sunday of the year.

In addition to sharing some of our forecasting techniques with the students, each member of the class had to answer three questions about their chosen domain, everything from demographics and real estate to the threat of climate change and severe weather. Those questions were –

1. What are the current conditions of your domain? If you took a snapshot of the domain today, what would it show? Where are things? How big are they? Who is involved? That question required students to do Internet research, find data and descriptions about their city and put those into a coherent presentation.
2. What is the expected future of your domain? Where is it headed? What will it look like in 2040? That question required students to understand the complexity of cause and effect and to extrapolate trends into the future.
3. And what might happen instead? What assumptions are we making about the future that might be incorrect? How could we be surprised by what happens in the future? That question required students to think critically about their expected future by challenging assumptions and imagining a significantly different future than what they expected. At the same time, they had to have a plausible foundation for that future and to present it in an imaginative and creative way.
4. And there is a fourth question that we did not have time for: What would prefer to see happen? Which of the alternative futures is better than others and why? That question would have required students to state their preferences and to examine the values that support those preferences.

That was a whole course. You can teach a whole course if you want, and that would be great, but you don't need to. Simply asking those four questions in most courses would be enough to teach about the future. I submit that every teacher should be able to do that if they wanted to.

5. What have I and others already done to teach the future?

I am not going to into any detail on what I have done because what others are doing is much more powerful.

As I have already mentioned that...

- I taught teacher in-services for school districts in Houston, for the Office of Overseas Schools and for CEESA, the schools association in Central and Eastern Europe.
- My colleague, Andy Hines, and I teach a Certificate course for professionals in Houston and Brussels each year, some of whom are teachers.
- I've written three or four articles about teaching the future over the past few years.
- We published a book in 2012 called *Teaching about the Future* that describes our curriculum at the University of Houston.
- I taught the high school course last semester and will do it again next year.
- And we are planning a video series on teaching the future to be completed, we hope, by the end of this semester or next summer.

So I've done what I can next to a full-time job. But enough about me. Others have been doing much more –

- Willis Goldbeck, a Board member at the La Jolla Country Day School, convinced teachers there to teach a course on the future. Willis has also organized the in-service for Overseas Schools for two years now and we are planning a third this summer with the support of David Cramer at the State Department.
- Based on Willis' support, the United Nations International School has also offered one or more courses on the future.
- One of our graduates taught the future for a whole year to an 8th grade gifted and talented class back in the 1980s.
- Another graduate included the future in her AP government classes in a school district in Houston.
- And here is a list of the projects that the first class in the Overseas program conducted last year.
- At the college level, the Mendoza Business School at Notre Dame requires a foresight course for every one of their undergraduates. They are already the second-ranked undergraduate business school in the country, but they still believe that introducing their students to foresight is a distinction that they are proud of.
- And finally, the California Command College is an executive preparation program for future police chiefs and sheriffs that is built around how to anticipate and influence change.

These are impressive accomplishments. They show that the need to teach the future is being met in small ways around the world. But when stacked up against all the teachers and all the schools and all the professional preparation that does not include foresight? Well, let's just say that we have a long way to go.

6. So the last question, What is to be done next?

As you know, I officially retired from my position at the University of Houston last August. All of what I have done, except the high school course, was on the side as a college professor. Now, and against my better judgment, I have moved foresight education to the top of my priority list. Everything that I have done before was inherited from someone else, including the UH futures program. Now I am starting something new. As I tell people in my seminars on leadership, I am committing to accomplish and to enroll others in the campaign to accomplish something of significance, namely to introduce students to the future.

To that end, I am announcing right here a new organization called *Teach the Future*. It's just me and a website at the moment, but my hope is that it becomes a community of like-minded educators and partners who will commit to doing what we can to introduce futures thinking into the schools at all levels.

Our vision is that "We teach the future as we do the past." We teach a lot about the past, as we should. That's where our traditions are, that's whence we've come. But we should also be teaching about the future.

I understand that this a monumental undertaking. I will not see the end of it, even if it succeeds. But that thousand mile journey begins with that one step, and this is my step.

Leaders ask themselves, "If not us, who? And if not now, when?" We can all be leaders in this movement, it's that early. This is the ground floor, if not the basement. My hope is that we will look back at 2014 as the year that teachers and schools began to take the future seriously for the sake of their students.

You can go to TeachTheFuture.org right now and see what is there. Do it right now on your phone or device. It's bare bones at the moment, but I assure you that it will grow over time. I will contribute what I have over the next month or so, but I hope that my contribution is insignificant compared to what teachers around the world will contribute. My hope is that a community, indeed a social movement forms around this vision – We teach the future as we do the past.

If you want to hear more or even get involved, send me an email to Peter@TeachTheFuture.org. Tell me about yourself, and more importantly, what you would like to do to introduce futures thinking to our students. I'll create a mailing list. That will be the beginning of the community.

I do hope you join. It will mean a lot to our students.

For more information or to join *Teach the Future*, contact Peter Bishop at peter@teachthefuture.org, [@teachfuture2](https://twitter.com/teachfuture2), or 281-433-4160.

We look forward to hearing from you...