Futures Studies Meeting a Growing Demand for 21st Century Education

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A Growing Demand

Listen to the advice. You can't avoid it. It's everywhere. Here is a brief test to determine where you stand. (Check each of the items with which you agree.)

- *We need to help students learn across disciplines.*
- *Active learning is the only way we'll be able to get our kids engaged.*
- *If we want our students to learn and hope to maintain their attention, then project-based learning, connected to real life, is essential.*
- *Let's face it. If what we hope to teach is going to mean anything to our students, we need to get them involved in learning through inquiry.*
- *On top of traditional Industrial Age skills, we need to be sure our students are learning 21st century skills.*
- *What we need to teach is reading, writing, math, and science.*
- *All of the above.*

If we believe that some or all of the above are important in getting students ready for life in a global knowledge/information age, then we should jump on our horse, wave a flag, descend the hill, and shout to the world, "Futures Studies to the Rescue!" Our challenge is not simply to promote the cause of futures education but to meet a growing demand for legitimate student achievement and an even more hopeful tomorrow.

However, some of us become so steeped in the futures discipline we fail to equate what people say they need with what we have to offer. In essence, those needs represent a subtle invitation to move ahead with an effective futures studies program. The need, of course, goes beyond education, to include the economy, security, health care, and legions of other fields. While we wait for someone to specifically ask for a futures studies course, the demand may slip away into a sea of lost opportunities.

Tumultuous times are often a transition between what we've been and what we hope to become in the future (Marx, 2009). What better time to demonstrate the value of creating a future than during a period of tumult, chaos, and complexity? We need to hear the call and help our students and communities learn to make sense of it all by using an array of perspective-rich futures tools.

Let's take a brief look inside some of the demands we're hearing to improve education.

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Learning across Disciplines

Any futures studies program worth its salt helps students learn across disciplines. What are the *technological* implications of *aging*? What are the *environmental* implications of an *economy* that is powered primarily by *energy* sources that grossly increase carbon emissions? These are typical of questions that force interdisciplinary answers.

Unfortunately, we are sometimes better at disassembling than we are at integrating. We focus on political, economic, social, technological, demographic, and environmental forces impacting society, and we should. However, noted Harvard professor and biologist Edward O. Wilson (1998) warns that "ongoing fragmentation of knowledge and resulting chaos in philosophy are not reflections of the real world but artifacts of scholarship" (pp.8-9). Futures studies can help us see relationships across canyons that seem to separate or compartmentalize more discrete and comfortable disciplines.

Breathing Life into Active, Project-Based Learning, Methodological Insights

Esoteric is fine, but action gives us hands-on experience. Let's take that concept into a traditional or virtual classroom.

Students get an assignment to meet with local officials as one step in analyzing local transportation needs by 2020. That project can nudge students toward in-the-trenches experience. They'll discover the excitement and benefits of collecting and analyzing information, generating ideas, thinking about alternatives, developing plans, considering obstacles and how to overcome them, and identifying possible benefits and consequences.

Whatever the actual project, students should be challenged to seriously consider the side-effects of their proposed actions. What are the possible wildcards? What could be both the intended and unintended consequences? Who will be the winners...and who might be the losers? What are the ethical dimensions? This is the stuff of active, project-based education. As educators, we simply need to give the process a focus on the future.

I have seen student teams take on projects such as securing fresh water for their remote community in west Africa, restoring historic monuments and raising concerns about environmental contamination in Russian cities, and speaking out on issues such as uncollected trash, lack of adequate sanitary facilities, and desecration of antiquities in Peru. All were intent on securing an even brighter future for themselves, their families, and their communities. In the process, they learned about the power they had within them, about courage, about the benefits of research, about the process of considering alternative futures, about building a case and pursuing a cause. Perhaps one of the greatest lessons is what students learn about their own potentials to crack the status quo and move on toward an even better tomorrow. Through their example, these students, in turn, teach public officials and their communities. Static becomes dynamic. Creating a future becomes real and could become the norm.

Using the Power of Learning Through Inquiry

Learning through inquiry is powerful. Let's use our imaginations to consider what we might do to address a cluster of problems faced by growing numbers of cities and towns across the nation.

Here's the situation. *Our town is losing population and having a hard time attracting new industries. Young people are leaving. The average age is going up dramatically; the population is simply getting older. Ideas are seen as criticism of what we're doing and as a threat to the status quo. The school arts program fell to a round of budget cuts two years ago.*

Student Assignment: Imagine that Leonardo da Vinci will be in town next Tuesday to address a community meeting where he'll discuss the situation and make recommendations. Your team will serve as his speechwriter. What would he likely want to say about this problem, how we got here and where we need to go in the future? The teacher recommends doing research: Find out what sociologists, politicians, business people, and others think we might do to save our community. For example, should we consider regionalization in order to develop critical mass in attracting people and new industries? Do we need to use our creative genius to invent a more sustainable future? Required reading, the teacher tells us, is the book, *How To Think Like Leonardo da Vinci.* Gelb (1998) As a four-member team, get this done and be ready both to do the presentation on Leonardo's behalf, should he not arrive, and to respond to probing questions during the community meeting.

What else can we do to promote learning through inquiry? At least once a week, invite a student to join in co-teaching a portion of a class. The student will be expected to explore a topic that will require research, stimulate thinking, and emphasize communication skills, such as speaking, listening, preparing PowerPoint visuals, and leading a discussion. As teachers, we might want to give our students experience in actually facilitating a group that is considering possibilities ranging from school safety to international security.

21st Century Skills a Result of Futures Studies

"What do you mean when you say our students need to learn 21st century skills, such as how to think and reason? That's nothing more than a distraction from teaching math, reading, writing, history, science, and a host of other essentials in their courses of study. Let's not waste our time." It's a fact that we want students to perform well in all of those subjects. However, their performance is more likely to take a quantum leap forward if they have something interesting to write about, compelling real-world applications for math, a sense that what they learn from history can be instructive as they create their own futures, a realization that reading can produce exciting ideas that they might never have discovered, and a conclusion that scientific discovery has only begun. Students more readily see the value in what they're learning. At the same time, they are honing their thinking and reasoning skills and developing their ability to thoughtfully consider possibilities and alternatives. By making connections, they learn for themselves that futures skills are, in fact, survival skills and keys to a more sustainable world.

In any area of study, including futures studies, the eternal question pops up: "Is this something we should teach as a separate discipline or as a part of existing subjects?" The answer is likely, "Both!" A futures studies class helps students understand that trend analysis, issue analysis, historical/defining moments analysis, gap analysis, reputation analysis, scenario development, environmental scanning, the Delphi process, and forecasting techniques are bread and butter, essential to a sound education. Those experiences will benefit them in every class they take and will contribute to their personal and professional success and well-being.

However, getting our students ready for a fast-changing world can't stop at the futures studies classroom door. In fact, students should encounter these and other techniques and find that future focus in every class. That means professional development in futures studies should be required of all teachers and administrators. The future is an interdisciplinary matter, and the concepts and techniques should not be confined to only one unit or one class.

Futures studies is not just a key to 21st century skills. It is also a key to 22nd century skills, with implications for all centuries to follow.

Futures Studies Beyond the Classroom

Beyond the classroom, futures professionals should provide counsel for their education institution and their communities. If we hope to learn from genius that is all around us, then we should consider sharing our knowledge and skills with community organizations. They are also concerned about their futures.

Organize a network of Futures Councils. These highly diverse groups should be advisory. Rather than make decisions, they can be invited to share their insights about trends and their implications. They can identify and sort issues according their probability and potential impact. They might even use generative thinking to consider possible scenarios for the future.

On a broader scale, Community Conversations can bring together perhaps hundreds of people to consider trends, issues, and leadership. These gatherings can then think about what they have learned, blend it with their own experience, and describe the community, school or school system, college or university, business, government, or other organization they'll need if they hope to produce an even more sustainable future.

Each Futures Council meeting or Community Conversation is a futures studies seminar in itself and is likely to build even greater demand and support for these courses or units in the classroom. Students, in fact, might very well be included among the leadership and participants in these community-wide events.

A Few Thoughts

Futures studies. It's not just a nice thing to do. Understanding how to stay in touch and shape the future are fast becoming survival and sustainability skills.

Some will protest against the whole idea of creating a future. A few will defend the status quo. "Leave well enough alone." "Better the devil we know than the devil

we don't know." "Who knows what the change will be or where it will take us? Don't we risk losing our history and our traditions?"

These are fairly common questions and they're good ones. One choice is to simply defend the status quo and hope for the return of a time or an industry that is no longer sustainable. In short, we can ride the curve into oblivion, while the world changes around us.

Another choice is to embrace our history and traditions and build a future on top of them, which might be the only way they will survive. By preparing our students and communities to think about and shape the future we actually make ourselves and our communities even more secure.

At the base of futures studies is a driving philosophy: *We have a choice. We can simply defend what we have or create what we need.* (Marx, 2006) Futures studies can help us make more reasonable choices. That, in a nutshell, is why it is so important.

Conclusions

Futures studies can provide an effective way to meet growing demand for education that prepares students for life in a global knowledge/information age. In fact, futures processes, such as trend analysis, issue analysis, gap analysis, and scenario development provide real-life opportunities for educators to pursue methodologies such as active learning, project-based education, learning across disciplines, and learning through inquiry. Beyond the classroom, futures educators and other futures professionals also have an opportunity to provide counsel to their communities and countries. A continuing challenge will be to get beyond the status quo and to stay on course in constantly creating a future.

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