

Futuristics and Education*

Dennis Van Avery

Forecasting and thinking about the future have been done for thousands of years. In the past, societies have been relatively successful in dealing with issues because of the slowness of change. Now, however, there are a number of crises caused by the increased rate, quantity, and quality of change. John Platt calls it "a crisis of crises all at one time." Change forms the context within which futurists view their particular vision of reality.

There are even more compelling reasons for advocating a futures perspective, especially with the youth of the world. In the October 1977 issue of *The Futurist*, Peter Schwartz, Peter Tiede, and Willis Harman explain the importance of a futures perspective and its accompanying skill of foresight:

In recent years, we have faced an energy crisis, an urban crisis, a food crisis, and many other crises. In each instance, significant responses came only after a manageable problem had developed into a massive crisis. If the pace of social change continues to quicken we can expect that we shall see crisis mount on crisis until we are overwhelmed. The only alternative is to identify problems before they reach crisis proportions so that appropriate action can be taken.

The Council on Environmental Quality and 13 other federal agencies submitted a report to President Carter entitled "Global 2000 Report." This report is the

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first federal government study to consider population, resources, and environment from a long-range, global perspective. The report warns that other ills may create enormous international tensions and endanger world peace by the year 2000. Among the emerging crises cited are ecological collapse, rising population, continued reduction of fertile farm area, scarcity of fuel, shortages of fresh water, a decline in the world fish catch, and increased oil prices due to decreased oil supply. In spite of these problems, futurists are generally optimistic.

New Skills Required

For most of history, humans focused on solving the problems of the world as it existed. Now society is beginning to focus on problems in the world as humans have re-

* This article is a brief synopsis of the report of an ASCD task force chaired by Dennis Van Avery. Other members were Geoffrey Fletcher, Donald Glines, Virginia Roth, and Richard Stock. The complete report may be ordered from the ASCD office for \$2 (payment must accompany orders under \$10). Ask for ASCD Professional Paper 1979-1, "Task Force Report on Futuristics."

shaped it. Problems today require new skills, including a tolerance for multiple interpretations and the ability to explore and create alternatives.

Children entering school in 1979 will be in their mid-twenties in the year when global turmoil is projected in "Global 2000 Report." Will they have the outlook, perspective, and skills necessary to deal with ambiguity? Will they be allowed to create alternatives that might affect the problems that have been cited?

Gaining a futures perspective implies that students in the present educational system and those who enter in the 1980s and 1990s will need an entirely different approach to learning. There will be a need to redefine knowledge, schooling, and education. The emphasis will be on learning how to learn, rather than on learning facts. Learning will move from a knowing to a searching emphasis.

The United States is a society in which learning and knowing are central issues. It is a society where education is flourishing, but where schooling is diminishing. Those in the school profession are but one important educational influence. Society needs a more comprehensive view of education that includes multiple organizations and varied constituencies who are deeply concerned about fostering personal growth.

Curriculums Must be Redefined

In the past, those who constructed educational programs have asked the question: "What should schools teach?" In the future, educational planners will need to ask,

"What learning opportunities should be provided for citizens?" Policies regarding appropriate educational programs need to be made with respect to the wide variety of institutions that educate.

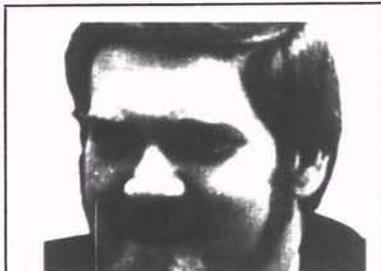
According to futurists, curriculum in its present departmentalized setting is as outmoded as medieval medicine. They indicate that knowledge is not segmented but interrelated. Future concerns can be considered only as interdependent wholes, not as segmented parts. The narrow specialization of English, social studies, science, art, and other subjects may need to be replaced by broader perspectives.

Related to curriculum is the redefinition of competencies beyond basic skills to include a much greater futures perspective. Curriculum as process rather than content may be an important variable in planning new learning environments.

Elements of a Futures Curriculum

Educators can facilitate a futures orientation for students by addressing themselves to the following elements:

1. There is not one predetermined future; rather there are many possible alternative futures.
2. The future will be determined by a combination of change and human choice.
3. Human choice is necessary. Even refusing to choose is itself a choice.
4. The future depends to a great extent upon choices that are made now.
5. The future will be different from past and present worlds, perhaps drastically different in some respects.



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6. Methods that were successful in the past may not work in the future.

7. Individuals are responsible for their own future.

8. Small changes over time can become major changes.

9. Future changes will alter personal lifestyles.

10. Students need basic forecasting skills.

11. Students need to anticipate and adapt to change.

12. Students need to acquire a longer time perspective.

13. Students should have the ability to conceptualize various levels of consequences, actions, and events.

If futurists are correct, foresight is mandatory in the areas of curriculum, competencies, and organizational procedures and structures. Changes in conventional patterns may be essential if schools are to produce a generation of students prepared to cope with and shape their futures. *EL*

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