

Workshop – Exercises to Stimulate Futures Thinking

1. Introductions, Context-setting

Introduction: What is futures studies and why should you care? What we hope to accomplish in a brief look at it.

2. Why Think About the Future?

(This can be a group discussion; it helps if you ask them to come to class with a short piece of writing about the future that they share to get them thinking – point them to the Futurology/Futures Studies entry on Wikipedia as a starting point for looking into it before writing about it before class... as part of the assignment, have them also write a brief poem with a futures theme of some sort – theme could be "An image of the global future")

NOTE: To save time and give everyone a chance to share his/her writing, have the students get in small groups first to share their poems about the future and have each group pick one to read aloud together line by line to the entire class and after that you could launch into the large-group discussion. You could also have them brainstorm a list of the words that they associate with the future and a list of the words that best describe the future for them.

Process: Why Think About the Future, and How?

Discuss the pre-class writing as a large group.

Q: What do your writing and poems tell us about your views of the future? What word(s) describe/s the picture you painted of your future? Why did you choose the themes you did – do they really reflect the most important things that should concern the world as we look toward the future?

Q: How far away is the future in your work? Did anyone include a date or reference to time in their poems?

Q: Do you think your future is realistic? What would you need to do to make that future happen or to avoid it if it is a negative future?

More large-group discussion

- What are the benefits of systematically thinking about the future?
- The future lies somewhere between pure utopia and dystopia
- How does the way we imagine our future (and the lack of any imagination about the future) help form that future?
- Does the future (5 and 10 years out) seem a long way off or not, why?
- What makes the future seem near or far?
- Discuss the concepts of paradigms, time frame, uncertainty, discontinuity and wildcards/black swans

- Thinking about the future is a way to understand choices and possible pathways in the present. We imagine our futures, but we live in the present. How do the two connect? How can we make the global future better by caring about it now?

3. Practice thinking about your future: Time Horizons, Uncertainties

This exercise gets students thinking about near- and long-term time periods, how their certainty regarding events in different time periods changes, what may shape the events in those time periods, and their ability and inability to control events (wildcards or “black swans”). When and how does your future happen?

Activity 1: Timeline

You all are going to create an individual timeline for yourself that stretches from 2007 to 2017. This is a timeline of your life. (Show timeline example.) Think how old you will be at each of these time periods and *who you will be at school, at home, at work, in your community, in the world*, in each of these periods. Think of your desires and challenges. We’re going to fill in each of these time periods that describe events, roles, and aspects of your life. In a little while, you will share your timeline in your small group. Let’s start one month out. (use long sheets of paper – like each student has three to five 8x10 pages lengthwise, and have Post-it notes ready for them to add items and take them off the timeline.)

Instruction: Think about the next month in your life. What are key events, roles/responsibilities, and aspects of your life in the next month? You have three minutes to work on this. (If you come up with a blank, then you have some serious work to do when it comes to organizing your life – think!)

- Students take a few minutes to write on their own timelines. Then they pick items they want to share on a group timeline by writing it on a large post-it note and sticking it on the group timeline.

- Do same activity for 1 year out, 3 years out, 10 years out.

- Students discuss these questions in their small group, then large group:

Q: How do items you posted change from one timespan to the next? Why?

Q: Which items are more certain or uncertain than others? What can you control or not control in your timeline?

Q: What did you learn about your future over the next ten years? Will that change anything for you?

Activity 2: Wildcards

Adapting to the unexpected future

Definition: Wildcards are unforeseen events that can create significant change and disruption. Students generate wildcards in their future and

discuss how their futures may change and what the consequences would be. (Continue to use timeline created in Activity 1) Instruction: What wildcards would change your timeline? Identify them. Take a few examples from the large group to kick things off. Then students add to their timeline using Post-its.

Large-group discussion:

Q: What are the wildcards in your near- and long-term future? Do you have some that you share with other students? Do you have some you share with other global citizens? What consequences do they create for you?

Q: How would you respond to specific wildcards?

What would help you anticipate these wildcards? (resources, learning, skills, relationships?)

Q: Are these wildcards coming from your personal environment or the broader external environment? (a transition to the Map of the decade)

Q: How would your timeline and wild cards change if you had been born in rural Somalia? In Iraq? In the remote regions of China? In North Korea?

4. Applying futures thinking to world issues

Use the UN's Millennium Development Goals

(<http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>), the Millennium Project's 15 Global Challenges (<http://www.millennium-project.org/millennium/challeng.html>) and/or the Institute For the Future's "Map of the Decade"

(http://www.iff.org/features/map_of_the_decade.html) as tools to get the students thinking about how the larger context and changes in the external environment create challenges, opportunities, and choices for people's lives in the present and future. Present highlights from many sources such as those above and also consider using stories from newspapers and magazines to bring it all to life.

Q: Which of these concerns, trends and forecasts are you most excited/concerned about? Why?

Q: What are some of the consequences of these concerns, trends and forecasts?

Q: How do these concerns about the future touch everyone's lives? What new choices, dilemmas, opportunities do they create? What can you do about it?

Be SURE to set aside enough time for these exercises – each can stretch into hours of interesting thinking, sharing and inspiration.