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Educator Spotlight

Art Shostak

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Professor Art Shostak's involvement in education dates back to 1947, when, as a wide-eyed 10-year old boy he watched his no-nonsense mother create a PTA organization, rally its rag-tag membership of working-class women, and lead them in storming the offices of the austere and distant Brooklyn Board of Education. They sought the re-designation of his K-6 public school as a junior high school (grades 7-9), as that would keep their children in the old neighborhood for three more school years and assure their influence over area schooling. and avoid busing to a distant school. To the astonishment of cynics, they won their re-designation fight – and he got his first up-close demonstration of the ability of aroused citizens to alter educational futures.

His first chance to personally employ educational futures came in 1961, when as a freshly-minted Ph.D., he began a 42-year career as a college teacher of sociology courses (including futuristics, which he introduced in 1970 to Philadelphia as a credit course at Drexel University, and, in 1980, to the American Labor Movement at the AFL-CIO George Meany Center for Labor Studies). His campus-based innovations included getting to class before everyone so as to re-arrange chairs in an inviting semicircle, inviting unorthodox guest speakers, requiring field learning exercises, developing brand new courses, and drawing on young co-learners for much class input, far more than they were accustomed to in other courses. He saw these and related practices as consequential aids to learning, theirs and his, especially as they pointed up openings for change, a future-making value he championed then and now.

Off campus in the 1960s, Professor Shostak joined the local Urban League chapter in an ill-fated future-shaping effort to defeat a school bond issue. His chapter pointed out it would only repair many fire trap old schools just where they stood (in a racially segregated pattern). They urged replacement of all schools by mammoth new Educational Parks, as they believed the consolidation of K-12 resources at such parks would give underprivileged urban youngsters access to a great onsite library, a fine gymnasium, and persuasive mentoring by able older

students. While their visionary scenario got many more votes than they had dared hope for, the “same old, same old” policy won the day ... a searing early lesson for Shostak in the vulnerability of Grand Reform Schemes to defeat by far less demanding notions.

In the same decade, Shostak helped some new and fragile charter schools (CS) try to define and operationalize their missions. This taught him how truly difficult were both matters, especially when so much had to be learned from scratch (unlike the current CS revival, for which a history is available as a guideline). Additional challenges were differences among parents about preferred school cultures (permissive versus demanding) and radically different expectations of the near-future for their offspring (dark versus bright). Indeed, he learned that schooling for tomorrow was anything but an easy row to hoe. Recounts Shostak, “As Vice President of the Board of the experimental private school my own sons attended, I learned how vital nitty-gritty matters were in keeping such a school one step ahead of the bill collectors.”

Before the decade ended, Shostak had an opportunity to help shape the educational component of new Job Corps Centers. He helped model the program before its launch by housing and schooling 300 male teenagers in University Dorms. They made clear how far behind their schooling had left them, and as an applied futurist Shostak warned visiting Job Corps officials that the evolving labor market required much these youngsters still had to acquire. Experimenting with raising reading literacy and personal aspirations, they were handicapped by unanticipated personal rehabilitation costs (as for overdue dental work, indispensable eye glasses, etc.) ... something no one had mentioned back in the planning stage.

Soon thereafter, Shostak moved to help college teachers of diverse subjects add futuristics to their tool kit. He was an invited speaker at K-12 In-Service Days in school systems around the country. In these talks he previewed major social and cultural trends likely to shape educational realities. Soon he was invited to give similar educational futures talks in Israel, Canada, England and Taiwan.

Eager to secure allies, Shostak increased his effort to get more sociology colleagues to use educational futuristics. In 1966, he edited *Sociology in Action*, a volume of 24 essays by change agents, including “Strategies for Initiating Educational Change in Large Bureaucratic School Systems,” by noted sociologists M. D. Fantini and G. Weinstein. Encouraged by responses to it, and to the entire volume, in 1974 he wrote his own 403-page book of pragmatic reform ideas, *Modern Social Reforms*, in which he paid particular attention to Educational Parks and forecast out several years worth of major changes. Later, in 2001 he compiled and edited a pioneering volume for the American Sociological Association (ASA) – *Utopian Thinking in Sociology: Creating the Good Society: Syllabi and Other Instructional Materials*. In 2003 Shostak edited a collection of 47 essays, *Viable Utopian Ideas: Shaping a Better World*, and he made a point of including six essays advancing reform ideas for education. Some of this must have been noticed, since the ASA named Shostak the sole 2006 winner of a lifetime award for Sociological Practice.

Most recently in 2008, Shostak capstoned his entire career with a monograph entitled *Anticipate the School You Want: Futurizing K-12 Education*. This book highlights future-shaping strategies that school people can grasp, appreciate, and employ – for only as they buy-in early and enthusiastically are reforms likely to earn lasting employ. In this book, Shostak draws on ideas from educational futurists that he regards as far abler, including Tom Abeles, Peter Bishop, Joe Coates, Jim Dator, James Morrison, Stephen F. Steele, and David Pearce

Snyder. Three proposals help set the book apart: It blueprints how to create and maintain an indispensable school Futures Committee. It urges development of a special career academy, a High School of the Future as Shostak designates it. Finally, it urges a biannual light-hearted Futures Fair, an event much like a Science Fair, but far less stressful and far more encompassing and energizing.

Recounts Shostak, “On reflection I think my 40-plus years of effort as an applied futurist to help educators upgrade schooling fall short of my romantic illusions at the outset, this, I suspect, a common conclusion of retired educators. Prospects for future success by others, however, are better than ever. A combination of powerful relevant trends has made anxious people across the globe newly open to plausible counsel from long-range planners. Overdue experiments in educational change, even of the radical variety, are possible as never before. Taken all in all, I believe my lifelong involvement with school people – adults and young co-learners alike – has been a grand adventure. It has enabled me to ally with inspiring people to make the most of education and futuristics, a combination on which may rest the fate of us all.”