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Anticipatory Learning Strategies for Schools and Organizations

Synopsis of the January 2006 WFS Washington DC Chapter dinner program presented by Marsha Rhea; summarized by Dave Stein

Orienting learning toward the future can transform individuals, organizations and communities, but implementation can be challenging – one reason being that the need has far outpaced the readiness. The present structure is weighted toward the past, and in fact schools mimic the workplace, teaching students how to live in the world that was. How, then, does one inspire future-oriented education? How does one inspire learners to anticipate the world that they want and help them develop the knowledge and skills to create a preferred future? These were the issues explored by Marsha Rhea, a senior futurist at the Institute for Alternative Futures, in her interactive discussion with the US National Capital Chapter, during which she presented powerful new insights for meeting these challenges.

Rhea began the program with her four dimensions of a future-oriented framework for learning:

- **Foresight**, which helps make sense of a changing world by analyzing *what we need to know about alternative futures*. It includes such learning strategies as exploring images of the future, environmental scanning, forecasting, brainstorming wild cards, and creating scenarios.
- **Identity**, which takes into account *what we believe about the world and ourselves*. Identity includes metaphors, values, alternative cultures, multiple intelligences, learning style preferences, and emotional intelligence.
- **Direction setting**, which forges the learning of foresight and identity into decisions about *what we want to create in the future and how we will do it*. It Includes appreciating prior learning, strategic issues, visioning, and goal-setting.
- **Innovation**, which explores the *solutions we can create together*. This is the dimension that focuses on brainstorming, multidisciplinary learning, simulations, and experiencing context.

These points are also captured in Rhea's new book, *Anticipate the World You Want: Learning for Alternative Futures*, which explores anticipatory learning for primary and secondary education.

FORESIGHT

Foresight focuses on theory of change, asking the question, “What makes change happen?” Examples include the technology theory, the evolutionary theory, and the social choice theory, noted Rhea. There is also the “push-pull-wait” model, in which “push” refers to trends and exterior forces, “pull” consists of values, visions, and social change, whereas “wait” accounts for resistance to change. Both the “pull” and the “wait” are cultural – the pull because it involves values, and the resistance because is partly a buying into the past. In her work with students, Rhea has found the theory of change to be an effective teaching tool.

As useful practices both for learners and for leaders, Rhea further emphasized the value of challenging the prevailing thinking – particularly the forecast that one wants to outsmart – and of questioning the assumptions on which the “official future” is based. In other words, scanning beyond the textbook version. To this end, Rhea pointed out that pre-teens love to challenge authority, in this case the textbook. At the same time, she acknowledged the need to pay attention to history – what has gone before and how it sets the conditions.

But one must also asked why something that was anticipated did not actually happen, continued Rhea. More generally, one must become more aware of the “white space” – that which he/she is not seeing. This is partly a matter of identifying unknown relationships.

IDENTITY

Turning to identity, Rhea pointed out that what we learn and do is bounded by our ethics, values, identities, intelligence, and emotions. We’ve been shaped by our schools. On the other hand, this is an era of “identity crisis” brought on by globalization and deculturation and also by challenges to rules such as gender rules. Furthermore, we have multiple identities that we try on. As an example, Rhea pointed out that people, especially youth, use different screen names online.

But do we teach people to understand when this is going on? How will this new learning change the “hard wiring” of our minds (to borrow a computer metaphor)? Rhea suggested that it is useful to identify contradictions between the values that one has vs. the values that one claims to have.

Continuing, Rhea pointed out that there are multiple layers of intelligence. Learning and education occur via the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modes. Then there are emotional intelligence, the Myers-Briggs personality descriptors, and religious or spiritual identity.

Contributing to the challenge of transcending one’s identity is that parents sometimes assume that their children will have the same learning experiences that they have had. Furthermore, people are generally more proficient at advocacy than at inquiry. But what if one challenges his/her identity? Student exercises that Rhea has found useful are, “I want to be remembered as ___ (fill in the blank)” or “What is it like to be an invalid?” or “What is it like to assume your enemy’s identity and mindset?” Acknowledging the possible comfort zone issues, Rhea proposed that the best way to challenge identities is to teach scenarios – “What if the world turns out differently? Who will you identify as then?”

DIRECTION SETTING

People/groups are quick to blame their existing power structures when goals are not achieved, observed Rhea. For effective direction setting, leaders need to communicate the vision daily, not episodically, and they need to empower the followers and then get out of the way. Furthermore, they need to identify what “success” is. Strategic conversation is another effective tool – that is, identifying

the strategic issues and where one can intervene. For example, while the environment may be the real strategic issue, “the environment” overwhelms people. Also useful is appreciative inquiry, that is, appreciating prior learning.

INNOVATION

It was here that Rhea drew a distinction between technical vs. social change and also between businesses and schools. Businesses fail fast, learn quickly, and improve – whereas learning is not structured that way in the classroom. There is no “opportunity to fail faster,” she noted, adding that a possible way to provide such opportunities is earlier deadlines, earlier drafts, and repeat experiments. Rhea also emphasized that while something may have failed in the past, conditions may be different now.

As innovation tools, Rhea pointed out the value of brainstorming and of interdisciplinary learning. Leaders need to remove barriers to innovation, she continued, and school administrators need to provide resources and flexibility.

Marsha Rhea is a senior futurist with the Institute for Alternative Futures, a nonprofit futures think tank with a 28-year track record working with nonprofits and governments. Rhea also has worked with major corporations through IAF’s for-profit subsidiary, Alternative Futures Associates. IAF is based in Alexandria, VA. Rhea is the author of Anticipate the World You Want: Learning for Alternative Futures, published in 2005 by Rowman & Littlefield Education. The book advocates for schools to empower people to be creators of their preferred future. She was an integral part of IAF’s research for the American Society of Association Executives Foundation on the future of associations and collaborated in writing Exploring the Future: Seven Strategic Conversations That Could Transform Your Association.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- How do you reach people in a way for them to absorb the information – visual, auditory, kinesthetic?
- How will the demise of a “career for life” change one’s sense of identity and the concept of identity?