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Book Review

Anticipate the School You Want: Futurizing K-12 Education

Arthur B. Shostak

Rowman and Littlefield Education (August 16, 2008)

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reviewed by Tommy T. Osborne

Let me make two disclaimers up front. First, I met the author at a FUTUREtakes breakfast during a World Future Society Conference in Washington, DC and was fascinated by his grasp of the topic. In addition, my personal and work life has been enriched by professional educators (my father, mother, and wife) and by the opportunity to teach for four years at the college undergraduate level. I say this only to note my decades-long observation that most recommendations for change in public schools have three characteristics:

1. they are not made by practitioners – public school teachers or administrators
2. many do not have a long time horizon
3. few are evidence-based

Art Shostak's book is a welcome contribution to the long view. Art is uniquely qualified to write this book on three fronts – he has PhD in Sociology and taught that subject in college from 1961 to 2003, is a charter member of the World Future Society, and has intimate knowledge of the state of public schools from several decades as a consultant.

Does being a consultant give one insight into the difficulties of classroom discipline, curriculum change, funding shortfalls, high expectations, and rapid change in the “solution du jour”? It does if the consultant, as Dr. Shostak did, touched teachers, administrators, and school board members at the local, regional and state levels. Having successfully proven the concept of futurizing in one's own classroom adds credence.

By title and tone, one might think this book is for pre-college educators and administrators as well as for futurists. However, I agree with Stephen Steele's remark in the book's Foreword that this volume should be read by parents as well as by college educators and administrators. In my opinion, students, and the general citizenry should also read this book and participate in its central tenets. Students, who will inherit the future, and the citizenry who will help fund it will find this volume helpful.

Central tenets – the first central tenet is that **futuristics** is a good tool for discovering alternative K-12 education futures and the means to get to the preferred future. Shostak says Futuristics’ major goals are: “finding pathways, uncovering preferences, illuminating possibilities, and identifying perils.” More than mere forecasting, futuristics is also a means to *anticipate the world you want* (also the title of a book by Marsha Lynn Rhea) and find the paths to make that preferred world a reality. Second, futuristics is an art and a body of knowledge that should be taught in K-12 classrooms.

This book has many superb components, it is well written and thought provoking, and it has a plethora of sources for self education in the Highly Recommended Reading and Notes at the end of each chapter. The introduction to Part III addresses the three way digital divide between the digital native students (and soon to be digital native parents), the computer smart educators, and the majority of minimally computer literate educators. The author describes many possible futures, from intelligent machines to the impact of voice in voice output (VIVO) computers. The Epilogue lists potential actions to drive local, state, national, and global futurizing.

Chapter 1 gives a great overview of the evolution of futurists’ models and limitations to forecasting and prescribes some guidelines to overcome those limitations. Every budding futurist should read this chapter and the curriculum in Chapter 5. I also recommend the sections on limitations in Chapters 1 and 5 to those who demand that intelligence analysts and economists (two groups who use futuristics) should be able to connect dots in unknown pattern with high reliability. Chapter 2 provides guidance on Shostak’s proposed school Futures Committee which has generic applicability to most committees. Many school systems now have committees chartered to bring about change for the better. Rather than create a new committee, I think that one should consider futurizing existing school organizations with missions similar to the Futures Committee. Chapter 3 addresses educational technology (ed tech), a resurgence of training in the arts, and a different, multi-state means of licensing teachers plus the usual recommendations for more money, aids, etc. Chapter 4 lists seven options for infusing futuristics into the curriculum, but I found two discrepancies. The fairly well accepted model of integrating a skill across the curriculum – such as reading in each subject is discussed at length, but without credit to the current practice. I was confused by the phrase “after first attending to test preparation activities” as a prelude to introducing futuristics into the subject – it appeared to indicate there were no future, better means of teaching content or of testing relevant knowledge and skills. Chapters 4-6 concentrate on building a futuristics magnet high school and Chapter 7 speaks to the Futures equivalent of a Science Fair.

This is an excellent book with three shortcomings. It does not address K-8 schooling in the detail given to high school. Future means to acquire content knowledge and hard skills in those grades are not addressed in depth. The second shortcoming is the lack of an index. Finally, it does not address the likelihood that less, rather than more funds will be available for education in years to come. States are cutting, rather than increasing K-12 budgets, since the Great Recession of 2008. A good futurist challenge for schools is similar to one that the Defense Department finished – identifying current funding and current facilities that can be repurposed to attain the future we want and need. These shortcomings notwithstanding, this is a book worth reading for all stakeholders in public education.