



## TEACHING &amp; LEARNING • MARC PRENSKY

# Looking back from the future

*“The future is here.  
It’s just not evenly distributed.”*

– WILLIAM GIBSON

**T**IME WAS WHEN understanding the past was a pretty good ticket to future success. But in the light of today’s crises, the voice of experience is only half the picture. The ability to steer a course into a perceived future is the other.

Perhaps it’s time to retire Santayana’s old canard: “Those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it.” And replace it with: “Those who cannot anticipate and prepare for the future will suffer in it.”

It is too easy to dismiss most of the technological changes that have taken place in our lives as not fundamental to a good education or to a sophisticated understanding of the world.

Consider the degree of free communication possible (“free” in terms of both content and cost) with people all over the globe—through email, texting, Skype, YouTube and other media. It is unprecedented, and it changes the game in many ways. We should try to anticipate even more profound changes and prepare for them.

“Citizen of the world” steadily describes more and more of our students. There is a global population on many American campuses. A growing number of U.S. students are spending academic time abroad.

We must prepare students as world-class communicators and collaborators. We often hear, “How can our schools, and our country, compete in the future?” A better question is “How can we all collaborate?” Another:



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“Am I preparing my students well for the rest of their lives?”

## When today’s students “grow up”

When today’s students reach your age, what will they be experiencing and doing? Is it possible some or all of the following academic actions will help us prepare them?

- Add mandatory “anticipation time” into every course. It could be a unit for students and their teachers to look at the subject under study, even if it is Greek History, and discuss (a) what major changes are likely to take place in this field and why? and (b) how and what will people likely be learning in this subject in thirty, forty or fifty years?
- Require students to read equal amounts of excellent science fiction and classical literature to get their “future juices” flowing.
- Offer courses in “using simulation.” Add simulations into all coursework.
- Devote significant chunks of administration and faculty time to discussing what future communication and collaboration will be like. One such discussion topic might be, “What will higher education be like when text is no longer the prime form of communication of ideas, but rather an exotic artifact, like slide rules or historical plays?” Or “When will written

reports and papers that are the mainstay of today’s college education be considered as old-fashioned as carbon paper or longhand re-writing?”

- Try to predict how asynchronous future communication will become. Email, texting and YouTube are surprisingly so. Previously taped lectures are in used by many colleges and universities. Students are using tools already on their laptops that enable them to speed up those lectures by a factor of two or more, and in some cases, it’s actually increasing their comprehension.
- Try to visualize reflection in the future. The slow, verbal reflection in today’s classroom discussions stands in sharp contrast to a gamer’s quick, intense non-verbal review of his or her previous behavior after ‘losing a life.’

Some educators deride the tools of the future as “technological spitballs.” Some maintain that the tools we have are the only ones we need. Are they our students’ best guides? If their students are using their computers or cell phones in class to work on Facebook, or other digital activities unrelated to class, it’s because those instructors are not filling their students’ time with useful, difficult, communication and collaboration-filled, world-oriented tasks. ■

