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Future Thinking in the Marketing Curriculum

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Future Thinking in Global Business and Marketing

Arguably education is for, if not about, the future. At every level, education seeks to prepare participants for what comes next. We argue here that a particular type of thinking informs this basic goal no matter whether the discipline be professional or scientific. The ability to envision alternatives, and assess the feasibility of each alternative is inherent in planning, research, marketing, law enforcement and politics. In fact, the often touted skills of critical thinking only come into play after alternatives have been clearly described. Given this, the need for future-oriented education is something to be addressed more specifically.

Future thinking, although not always labeled as such, is inherently a part of the marketing curriculum. Marketers are always anticipating, planning for, and implementing change. This is particularly true in marketing areas related to product and new product development. This process has been labeled innovation, entrepreneurship, disruptive innovation, etc. However, the basis for these approaches is future thinking. Future thinking has been analyzed in terms of temporal focus, approach vs. avoidance of positive and negative outcomes, proximal and distal goal setting, the ability to disengage from the immediate environment, the capacity to envision, the ability to consider the potential consequences of action, the capability to override current needs in favor of longer term goals and the ability to mentally pre-experience an event. It has also been linked to episodic memory. It is believed that episodic memory and future thinking emerge developmentally at about the same time (Atance and Metoff, 2005). Future thinking is also related to the ability to remember past events, what has been called autobiographical memory. Memories and imagining both involve a kind of mental time travel to construct or reconstruct episodes. It is this episodic memory capacity, that is critical to future thinking for it allows us to imagine a possible (otherwise non existing) future (Berntsen and Bohn, 1020). Although some are more adept at future thinking, as with remembering, it is an ability that can and should be developed more and therefore should receive more attention in our curricula.

What is Future Thinking?

The term future thinking is conceptually rooted in cognitive and developmental psychology. Atance and O'Neill (2001), drawing on Tulving's concept of episodic memory (1984), defined a more specific type of self-projection in which a future state is "pre-experienced." In future thinking, however, the imagination is constrained to specific sequences, for example: thinking about a future vacation requires consideration of what work must be complete before going, how much spending money will be needed, etc. Future thinking embodies prospective memory (planning and remembering to execute the plan),

judgement and decision making (for example considering constraints), goal attainment (implementation intentions or commitment) and future time perspective (the extent to which future potential distant outcomes influence current behaviors). Developmentally, future thinking starts to appear about age 3 when children's talk includes an understanding that the future is not merely a recapitulation of the past. Children can choose a larger delayed reward by age four. It is not until age 4 to 5 that children exhibit more sophisticated planning and anticipatory behaviors.

Future thinking isn't just about the future, however. The implicit self-narrative in future stories relates to individual difference characteristics such as self-efficacy and self-image congruity. Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), is the extent that one believes in their ability to complete tasks, reach goals and control their own destiny. Level of self-efficacy relates to how difficult a task one is willing to take on and how long they will stick with it. People who believe that they have more control of their lives are more willing to think about the future. Conversely, those with a greater ability to imagine the future envision more positive than negative possible outcomes. This is also related to Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982), the idea that I see myself in comparison to some ideal other. A future self can be defined in comparison to an ideal self of the future. Those with greater ability to imagine a future self are more likely to do things in the present to move toward that ideal future self.

Future thinking therefore has the potential to promote subjective well-being (Diner, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999) by virtue of promoting more positive thought about the future, the feeling that there is more ability to control the future and by having a more crystalized image of an ideal self in the future.

From Future Thinking to Foresight

Futurist use the term foresight rather than the psychological term future thinking to describe the ability to predict or action of predicting what will happen or be needed in the future. Foresight addresses three basic questions: what do you think is going to happen? (the expected future), what might happen instead? (the alternative future), and what do you want to see happen? (the preferred future). These

visions of the future are expressed as scenarios or stories that allow current trends to be extended, uncertainties acknowledged, and triggering events to be forecasted. Peter Bishop's framework (Figure 1) articulates the inputs and outputs at various stages of the foresight process. The foresight process starts with environmental scanning not unlike a SWOT or situation analysis in marketing. History and current conditions are

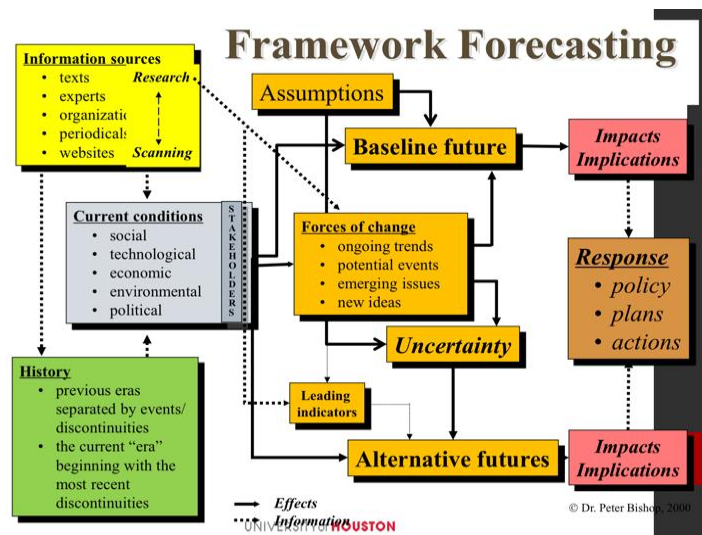


Figure 1. Peter Bishop's Foresight Framework

inputs to a baseline or most likely or future.” The baseline future yields implications for policies, plans and actions. Although the forces of change such as trends, emerging issues and new ideas have an impact on the baseline future, uncertainty around such events requires the development of alternative scenarios. The foresight process, as the name implies, adds a temporal dimension by incorporating trends or certainties, uncertainties and triggering events over time (Schwartz,1996). Certainties are things already in the pipeline, so to speak, that we know will happen although we don’t know when. Uncertainties are representations of what we are most fearful will happen. The most dynamic component of the foresight process, however, is the anticipation of key triggering events. These are moments when the flow of history changes and we experience a discontinuity in trends. Such discontinuities are sociological (women entering the workplace in the 70’s), but can also be defined by new ideas or marketplace innovations (the advent of the smartphone). This part of the foresight process draws heavily on future thinking skills but also enhances future thinking abilities.

The specification of uncertainties and triggering events requires episodic projection of future conditions and what personal outcomes will result. The elicitation of uncertainties, basic fears that one would worry about happening, requires an episodic future projection incorporating a “felt experience” and courses of action. It is almost automatic to start to think of solutions to future situations based on fears coming true. The ensuing solution/story represents an alternative plausible projection of events that could happen. Episodic future projections are not all based on fears. Sometimes events open new potentialities. Eliciting such events requires episodic future thinking and the ability to follow alternative story lines and ask what could have caused this to happen. Those adept at this kind of thinking respond easily to exercises like the following:

It is the year 2040, April the 10th, at 9AM; how old are you? where are you? what do you see around you, you pick up the New York Times. What story do you see on the front page?

Any number of associations become possible based on this instant of episodic future thinking. Foresight and scenario planning are methods of mapping current conditions into what is likely to happen. The goal is to make us aware of potential changes that the future might hold, not to predict what will happen. Those in the business and marketing fields should have more exposure to the foresight process and the development of episodic future thinking skills.

The Place of Future Thinking in Business and Marketing Pedagogy

Scenario planning has been a part of strategic planning since the 1980’s. Pierre Wack’s HBR article is often cited as the seminal work that developed interest in scenarios (Wack, 1985). Alternative scenarios have been used in marketing going back to the Seven Tomorrows report by the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) (Hawken, Ogilvy and Schwartz, 1982). SRI later developed their scenario planning research into a report for marketers by emphasizing consumer values and lifestyles (VALS). VALS has since evolved and been matched to consumption patterns for various types of goods and services.

Although these processes and typologies have proven to be valuable, the development of future thinking skills at an individual level is even more important pedagogically. One of the most useful places in the business or marketing curriculum is teaching innovation in courses like new product development or international marketing. Innovation requires seeing beyond customary boundaries. New product marketing courses devote time to the development of creative thinking through methods like perceptual thinking, lateral thinking and design thinking (deBono, 1993 and Kelley, 2013). International marketing similarly devotes time to the transmigration of cultural boundaries that requires the extension of perceptions beyond common taken-for-granted assumptions. To develop a strategy for someone outside your culture to use a product, requires information about the current conditions and history of the culture, as well as, an understanding of the events, trends and emerging issues at play; in short, the foresight process. Training in the foresight process and future thinking would support marketing curricula, especially, the courses related to innovation and international marketing. We also see benefits in developing socio-cultural understanding locally.

Testing Future Thinking - Innovation in Socio-Cultural Understanding

Most large institutions employ some form of strategic foresight or forecasting. It is our belief that education has the obligation to think and plan, similarly, for contingent and diverse futures. Some U.S. universities have from the outset acknowledged an obligation to give back to the communities in which they are situated. These are commonly state universities and so-called land grant universities which have roots in federal planning schemes for mass education. We embrace this ethos and history. All around us are the tools to forge a connection between the university and communities on both local and global levels. As the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) put it in 2011, the publicly engaged institution is committed to direct, two way interaction with local communities.

Our university, a state university and a member of AASCU, has a particularly diverse student population. It has, since its founding, been committed to join public with private partners to take on the long term challenges that the surrounding community confronts. We acknowledge the business school has a “responsibility for place,” as well as a responsibility to the students that we educate. A charge we take on by executing our responsibility to develop leaders committed to local stewardship. We reflect a remarkable conjuncture of local students, Black, Latin, Euro and Asian Americans as well as a growing constituency of overseas students from Vietnam, various participating African nations and Saudi Arabia. Recently we initiated a Fellows Program to engage our students in a civic mission. Over the last year and a half we developed a pedagogy stressing future thinking in the context of local socio-cultural development problems. The 2040 Project is a program for a select group of students to develop scenarios for the university for thirty years from now. It involves training in the foresight process, exercises to enhance future thinking

abilities and finally, the development of alternative scenarios. With no prior experience the students produced their first scenario last semester that we called:

“Passing the Mantle”

In the year 2016, the United States Congress passed with bipartisan support comprehensive immigration reform that allowed for more than 12 million immigrants to become new citizens. This reform also made the border with Mexico a military zone. The use of drones and electric fences had been protested by both countries, to no avail. “The Reform”, as it was known, also provided for new immigrants to either enter the military or enroll in a four-year institution

“Passing the Mantle,” tells the story of a university addressing problems and opportunities that are, for the most part, unforeseen at this time. Extending students ability to process future events and think about the future with regard to their institution has yielded unexpected results.

It is a given that change is inevitable and accelerating.. Successfully dealing with change requires psychological adaptation to avoid “future shock.” Toffler suggests, “. . . most schools, colleges, and universities base their teaching on the usual tacit notion that tomorrow’s world will be basically familiar: the present at large. Nothing, I believe, could be more profoundly deceptive.” (Toffler, 1974, 5.5)

Imagining a future more complicated and culturally diverse than the past is a key to becoming a more global society. Education for such a society should include the development of future thinking capabilities.

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