



EXPERIENCING THE NEEDS OF FUTURE GENERATIONS WITH ADULTS AND CHILDREN

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This report is a description of an exercise in *visionary futures exploration*—the use of imagination and intuition to discern transformational future possibilities and their implications for present-day values, attitudes, policies and decision making. A guided cognitive imagery script is presented which, when read aloud, takes the hearer on a journey to different time periods, both past and future. The participants are asked to scan back across all the time periods they have visited during their journey, to gain a more global sense of perspective on what is truly most important; and in response, to imagine sending a message from the future back to the present regarding, *What future generations need from us*. The results indicate that this method works well with both adults and children. Responses of children in particular indicate that it often gives them a greater sense of relationship with, and responsibility for the future. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

What if we looked at our present place in human history from the vantage point of future generations? What would be found most important about this particular era in human history? If we had the hindsight of 'future history' to guide us, what changes in underlying attitudes, behaviors, laws, and policies would we suggest as being wise, or even imperative, in order to minimize the likelihood that future generations will inherit a world that has in many ways been ruined by those who came before? This brief report offers a way to explore possible answers to these questions by using guided cognitive imagery as a teaching/learning tool. For a full-length description, including the imagery script

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Methodology

This program was pilot-tested with five groups: elementary school children, ages 8–11; Regional Human Resource Directors in a Fortune 200 Transnational Oil Company, and graduate students at UHCL in each of three different fields of study: Studies of the Future, Business Management and Environmental Management.

Following a brief introduction to set the context for the exercise, a guided cognitive imagery script was read. After the exercise, participants were asked to complete a brief survey. Children were also asked to draw pictures of what they had experienced.

Beginning with the past: the nomadic era

The exercise begins with an imaginary journey back to the nomadic era in which a tribe is facing climate changes that are diminishing their food supply. The participants are asked to imagine what it would feel like to be a member of the tribe faced with these types of changes. They are asked to explore such questions as: "How do people in your tribe deal with problems that threaten your future?...What do they do to find the answers they need?"

Transition to industrialism and urbanization

In scene two of the exercise the participants travel forward, to a different historical era; when the impacts of colonialism are being felt in all parts of the world and traditional indigenous village life is giving way to industrialized society. They are to imagine themselves as village elders; and from the perspective of what they, as elders, most deeply valued, to search for answers to questions such as: "What needs to happen in order that future generations of our people will be able to realize these values, should they choose to do so?"

Short-Range future-facing 'limits to growth'

The 'daydream' then shift one generation or 20–30 years into the future. At this time, human civilization is (presumably) faced with the consequences of exponential population growth, resource depletion, pollution and other things which, if they were to continue to grow, would exceed the very carrying capacity of 'Spaceship Earth' both for human civilization and for other important species which spring forth in this planetary nest. They are asked to imagine the last day of the year, 25 years in the future, and tune into a TV show that summarized the big events of the year. While the show plays in their imagination they are asked to consider questions such as: "What progress has been made in dealing with problems such as growth in population, pollution, and so forth?... What is now possible due to new technologies?...What do people find important when they considered these types of problems?"

Long-Range future-resolving 'limits to growth'

The imaginistic time traveler next journeys 200 years, or about eight generations into the future—a time in which things are (presumably) becoming decidedly clear as to how the whole issue of how humankind has dealt with the implications of exceeding the carrying capacity of the planet. Once again, the participants are asked to consider some important questions. For example: "What actions by previous generations caused things turn out this way?...How would you describe what life was like here?...How did people in this time and place go about guiding what the society was about?"

The very long-range future—beyond limits to growth?

The daydream now shifts very far ahead—to some 2500 years or 100 generations into the future. After having time to imaginatively experience this, participants are asked to answer questions from the perspective of all the dimensions that were relevant at this future time. The questions were: "How are things now most different from what they were like 2500 years ago?... What is your body like?... What is the world like?... Does the concept, 'Future Generations' mean anything different here than it did back 2500 years ago, when you were having the daydream of being here now?"

Scanning our history for patterns

The imaginistic daydream concludes with a journey back across all the time periods that had been visited during the journey. As the participants scan across the nomadic era, transition to industrialization and urbanization, the short-range future, the long-range future and the very long-range future, they are asked to get a sense of what was common and what was different in each; to answer to the question: "What things stood out for you as most important?" Finally, given what they have seen about human history, both past and future, the participants are asked: "If you could send a message from the future back to the present, so as to communicate what future generations most urgently need from us, what would that message be?"

Adult responses

The results with the four adult groups indicated that many graduate students in Studies of the Future (who are becoming experienced in thinking about alternative future possibilities) found the programmed exercise led to no significant new learning. Graduate students in both the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) and Environmental Management however, had deeply moving experiences leading them to appreciate the importance of taking seriously the needs of future generations; and to do so in ways they had simply never considered or understood before. The experience of Human Resource Directors with the exercise tended to fall in between these groups. They agreed that it was a significant exercise, but by and large it did not bring about reactions that stood out, for most, as noteworthy. Most of them said that they would be more concerned and aware of the needs of future generations than would otherwise have been the case.

Table 1 provides a condensation of the responses the adults gave upon completion of the exercise.

TABLE 1.

Message from future generations	Differences in perceptions	What needs to be changed/done differently
We need continuity and consideration The Earth is not yours to exploit Focus on education Your problems are solvable You need to listen and cooperate with each other	I think about the future more The future needs to be engineered We need to imagine different technologies and ways of living	We need to accept change as a part of life We need to develop a holistic approach to solve our problems The focus must be on cooperation not competition

Children's responses

The results with the school children were of an entirely different character than those of the adults. As learners, they appeared to resonate much more than adults with the teachings that were latent in the exercise, drawing pictures and writing words that powerfully depicted their vision of the future.

At the onset of the exercise, the children were asked what they thought about the future. They responded with fearful images, combined with feelings of anxiety and impotence. Most felt that the 'future world' would be much worse than it was today. There was a palpable sense of angst among the children.

Upon completion of the imaginistic journey, there was a marked change in the childrens' perceptions of the future and the realization that they had a part to play in it. This change was evidenced by a lowered anxiety level that again was palpable, and a sense that the future 'might not be so bad after all.' One of the most encouraging results related to the exercise was that the childrens' perceptions of the future had been transformed. It was no longer something that caused fear, combined with feelings of impotence, but was tangible, and they felt a responsibility and a connection to it. The experience imbued the children with a sense of enthusiasm and empowerment in regards to their role in creating a desired future.

Illustrations of the childrens' experiences

The survey forms contained below in Figures 1 and 2 exemplify the words and images depicted by the children following the guided imagery exercise. These were included to give the reader a clear sense of the effect this exercise had on the participants.

Transformational experience

The children responded to the imagery exercise on a different level than that of the adults. Their journey evoked new ways of perceiving, which involved cathartic and transformational responses. This imagery tool gave them an opportunity to explore different aspects of the future by using their imagination and intuition in a non-threatening manner.

Some envisioned a world full of things, and ways of living that have yet to be created. One child felt the belief system we have today would be completely different in the

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Survey Form:
What I Experienced in the Visualization Exercise on "What Future
Generations Need From Us"

1. The most surprising thing(s) that I experienced in the exercise:

Made me think of
things I have never
thought about

2. Based on what I experienced, the future looks like:

Not as much pollu-
shin, and not as much
trash.

3. The "message" I felt should be sent from the future back to the present
regarding what future generations need from us was:

that we need to do more
to keep people living

4. Other things I want to say about this exercise:

It was pretty fun.

5. Draw a picture of your vision of the future.

Figure 1

future. Others felt that if we did not change the way things are done, we would cause our own extinction.

Another said that we need to "go into the past, present and future to see what needs to be done." The experience provided a way to investigate their feeling of angst in regards to the future and re-vision it into something that was less threatening, even exciting.

One child said of the future, "Maybe it won't be as bad as I thought, who knows, maybe we will have peace one day." Another said, "The future is not so bad. We should

Survey Form:
What I Experienced in the Visualization Exercise on "What Future
Generations Need From Us"

1. The most surprising thing(s) that I experienced in the exercise: That 200 years from now is that the world ~~may~~ be alot^{of} different,
2. Based on what I experienced, the future looks like: In the future every body has to wear a gas mask becquise it is so~~o~~ poluted but they don't have to wear it inside because the poluting will be sealed some the inside.
3. The "message" I felt should be sent from the future back to the present regarding what future generations need from us was: Not for there~~s~~ to be any poluting vehichles of cemical plants.
4. Other things I want to say about this exercise: It was fun just closing my eyes and trying to think what the world is coming to.

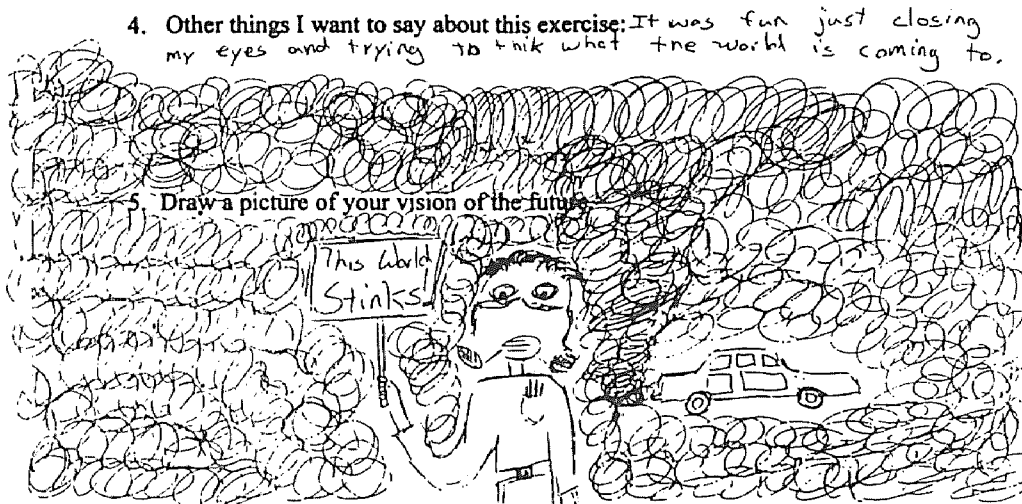


Figure 2

look forward to it." A eight year old girl wrote, "I think it (the future) will be better than today. It will be a time when we know more."

The messages 'sent' from future generations back to the present by children were poignant, practical and informative. One message from the future simply said, "Do not let the world fall apart, we need it". Another message received from future generations was, "Take care of our world, it is not yours to destroy." Several identified the need for more cooperation among the citizens of Earth. Most mentioned the need to conserve our

resources for the people of the future. Other messages concerned population control, pollution, and the problem of increased resource demands.

The insight gained from the exercise helped the children develop a sense of continuity, caring and concern for their 'future ancestors'.

The connection made with future generations seemed to precipitate a transformation in the childrens' previously held notions concerning what was truly important in a global sense. This transformation was indicated by responses that suggested *they now saw everything in a different way*. Experiencing the needs of future generations in this way provided the children with a newly discovered awareness of the responsibilities, possibilities and opportunities concerning their role in caring for the world and it's future inhabitants.

The role of imagination

Imaginative work need not be viewed as peripheral, but complimentary to the work involved in shaping normative futures.⁷ The idea of consciously setting out to create mental images of better futures in order that these images might in themselves be uplifting to the spirit and empower otherwise paralyzed societies to action on behalf of an actual better future was born in the mind of Fred Polak.¹ More recently, Allen Tough, in his paper 'What future generations need from us,' reported the benefits of the use of individual and group role playing as a means to ascertain the answer to this important question.²

Metaphorical images deeply influence the shape of one's perceptions of a future world. They move us beyond dualistic experiences of self and world to the dimension of the future. In the book *Moral Imagination*, Mark Johnson has argued that moral concepts are pervasively rooted in image and metaphor.³ He asserted that understanding morality requires understanding those imaginative, metaphorical structures of meaning. Furthermore, to become morally insightful required the development of empathetic imagination, the capacity to sensitively 'take up the parts of others,' and the ability to envision constructive actions.⁴ It has been recognized that the temporal shift from past/present orientation to one that embraces the long-term future can be very difficult for many people.⁵ The guided imagery exercise described in this report seems to provide a way for participants to incorporate the learning from this past/present shift into changed perceptions, enlightened choices and future generation oriented actions.

Ethical concerns and the use of guided cognitive imagery

The exercise recounted in this paper is an example of a new and radically participative approach to 'future generations' research, communication and education—one that can be used in many different ways. The use of this approach may initially disconcert some. However, what is called 'guided cognitive imagery' is in fact active imagination, and shares many similarities with the widely accepted teaching method of role-playing.

The goals and implementation which are involved in both role-playing and guided cognitive imagery are similar. These include getting in touch with ones' feelings, seeking fresh insight by examining issues or ideas from anothers' perspective, the clarification of values, enhanced decision-making and informed creative problem-solving. Both activities begin with the reading of an open-ended story or script followed by questions that are designed to delve into the insights revealed during the exercise.

Guided cognitive imagery could be described as a type of imaginative, intuitively

informed mental role-playing which represents a powerful new teaching/learning tool that offers many possibilities for the advancement of 'future generations' research, communication and education.

Suggestions for use

It is suggested that as a teaching/learning strategy, guided cognitive imagery has much to recommend it. It provides a simple and direct vehicle for school children to grasp the future significance of present actions—a most important survival skill for citizens of the 21st century who will be faced with environmental challenges of unprecedented proportions.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this report on '*visionary futures exploration*' will inspire others to use this exercise and others like it as a teaching/learning tool to increase understanding of the future significance of present actions. In the field of 'future generations' research, communication, and education it represents a radically participative approach that is not only simple to use but which will inspire significant increases in global consciousness.

The children reacted enthusiastically to the exercise and several expressed appreciation for the opportunity to '*use their brain in a different way.*' They found the experience fun, exciting and thought provoking. It left them with an increased curiosity and a desire to think and learn more about the future. They were also left with a heightened sense of awareness concerning their responsibilities as 'global citizens.'

The results of this exercise indicate that its use facilitates the development of a global perspective that includes contemplation of present decisions and actions in relation to the effect they have on future generations.⁶

Notes and references

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