

Foresight Capabilities that Enable Learners to Adapt to Societal Disruption

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Abstract

Can students be taught the foresight learning capabilities that will allow them to adapt to complex environments, societal disruptions, and dire circumstances?" Learning capabilities are the skills, proficiencies, and dispositions that enhance students' capacity to produce outcomes that enable future growth. Societal disruptions tend to bring values to the fore. Acts of inclusion are expressions of foresight learning capabilities. Disruptions prompt the world to reconsider a fundamental question: What work and which organizations are essential to society's function and development?

Introduction

Until recently the tacit assumption was that stability is the norm and that disruptions tend to be episodic. An increasingly diverse array of societal disruptions and macroeconomic shocks has prompted the world to reconsider a fundamental question: What work and which organizations are essential to society's function and development? For educators entrusted with educating the nation's youth, it is imperative to articulate a societal purpose that makes a difference in learners' sense of their place in the world and their role in creating the future. If an educational institution attempts to operate without a social purpose involving aspirational and ethical conversations about diversity, inclusion, and racial justice, can it endure? To what extent can academic institutions impact the development of society without confronting contemporary cultural trends that reflect extremism: intolerance, division, isolation, alienation, and anxiety? In instructional settings, a foundational sense of *societal purpose* and *human connection* is essential in developing the foresight learning capabilities that allow students to identify emerging patterns of societal disruption and to respond reflectively, resiliently, and empathetically (July 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deepening societal challenges including concerns regarding climate change, racial inequality, income disparities, political polarization, declining trust in government, cybersecurity, the accelerating pace of technological development, and societal fragility. The societal challenges confronting our educational institutions merit stepping back and asking: "For our part, how can we do things better?" In the midst of a pandemic, how do we educate students to work from facts, interpretations, assumptions, conclusions, and beliefs to build the critical foresight capabilities that permit learners to sense, shape, and adapt to societal disruptions and shocks? The pedagogical challenges in doing so are daunting for two reasons: Whatever one's educational intent, research suggests that "learning capabilities cannot be forced, rushed, or imposed on others" (Senge et al. 1999, 46). Moreover,

developing foresight learning capabilities is profoundly challenging because one must be open to the possibility of changing oneself.

Developing Foresight Learning Capabilities in Instructional Settings

Can students be taught the foresight learning capabilities that will allow them to sense, shape, and adapt to uncertainty, ambiguity, and societal disruption to achieve results that are important both to them and to society? Foresight learning capabilities are the skills, proficiencies, and dispositions that enhance students' capacity to produce outcomes that enable future growth. Educational philosopher John Dewey (1916) argued that “the object and reward of learning is the continued capacity for growth” (117).

Building an Ethical Framework

Building an ethical framework is an essential component in developing students' foresight learning capabilities. Stanford University, for example, has an ethical reasoning class requirement for all students. Former Stanford President John Hennessy argues that the “purpose of ethical reasoning isn't to solve all of your ethical dilemmas for the rest of your life.” Rather, the purpose of the course is to provide learners “a framework for dealing with ethical issues that will arise in your career” (Gross 2020, 71).

Perspective-Taking: An Ethical Framework for Developing Foresight Capabilities

Societal disruptions bring values to the fore in academic and instructional environments. In classroom settings, perspective-taking is a vital component in developing foresight learning capabilities involving moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral courage. For students, the understanding and application of ethics in their personal lives is one of the most challenging aspects of the human experience (Dittmar 2021). In classroom discussions regarding societal disruptions, *perspective* constitutes an ethical point of view from which learners determine what is right and what is wrong.

Before engaging students in an ethical conversation related to a significant societal event, educators might consider asking students to develop a short list of ethical considerations important to them. In creating their lists, students might consider these reflective questions: What do I most value in life? How do I know or determine what moral or ethical principles I stand for? How do I know when an ethical situation exists? How do I know when I have to make a decision that has ethical or moral implications? What are the values or beliefs that will help me determine how to act in addressing an ethical issue or dilemma? (Dittmar 2021) The instructional implication in posing reflective questions is compelling: Students “cannot complete a *process* of ethical decision-making without developing a *perspective*” (Dittmar 2021, 43).

Acts of Inclusion Evoke Expressions of Foresight Learning Capabilities

Diversity is not a goal. Rather, it is simply the nature of the global talent pool. Inclusion is the means by which this diverse pool is engaged effectively in the development of society. In both the classroom and the workplace, individuals either experience inclusion—or don't—in the attitudes, behaviors, and actions of their classmates and educators (Johnson 2020). Inclusion is a deeply human activity. At the institutional

and classroom level, “only the daily practice of inclusive behaviors can build an inclusive culture” (Helgesen 2021, 48). The instructional implication is that classrooms are webs of participation. Change the participation and you change the classroom.

Inclusion cannot be instilled by mission statements, value statements, conversations about gender and race, well-meaning intentions, symbolic reform, or by “training programs that promise to surface and root out unconscious bias” (Helgesen 2021,48). No matter how well-intentioned and intellectually engaging these *activities* might be, they are not *outcomes* driven by human emotion. Neuroscientist Donald Calne draws the distinction: The difference between reason and emotion is that emotion leads to action, whereas reason leads to conclusions.

Inclusive behaviors honor the spectrum of human experience (Harris 2019). Learners’ emotions affect how they think and feel about what is present in their midst. LaShyra Nolen is a second-year medical student at the Harvard Medical School where she is serving as student council president of her class---the first Black woman to hold this leadership position. Last year she led an advocacy effort to rename one of the five academic societies at Harvard named “Holmes.” Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. was a supporter of eugenics and the genocide of Native Americans and also the past medical school dean who expelled the first Black student admitted to the school. Despite his unsettling legacy, the Holmes’ name “lingered in the spaces where students learned to become healers and struggled to build community.” (Nolen 2021, 13)

As student council president, LaShyra Nolen successfully led an advocacy group to rename the Holmes’ Society at Harvard, galvanizing support in the form of over 1000 signatures from students, alumni, faculty, and staff. As a young Black woman, she “felt uncomfortable with the celebration of Holmes in our learning spaces” (Nolen 2021, 13.) While the renaming was a significant achievement for LaShyra, it served as a reminder that symbolic change goes only so far. Against the backdrop of her lifelong commitment to social justice, LaShyra sensed resonantly that “the removal of problematic symbols also necessitates the removal of the conditions that lead to their creation” (13). In academic and social setting, LaShyra’s foresight learning capabilities prompted her to pose three evocative questions to guide participants’ thinking and actions: Who is present? Who is heard? Who is welcome? As a fervent advocate for social justice, she listens intently for an inclusive response: “Everyone.”

Adapting to Low-Probability, High-Impact Events: A Critical Foresight Learning Capability

Every crisis evolves over an arc of time, through stages of “what was,” “what is,” and “what will be.” In *Uncharted: How to Navigate the Future*, Margaret Heffernan (2021) contends that we have come to expect the future to be perfectly predictable. In a world of great uncertainty, volatility, and fragility, however, the author argues that we must get comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity about the future, especially when facing complex environments. Recent events, including escalating tensions in the Middle East and global cybersecurity threats, suggest that the world is getting more, not less turbulent. In their groundbreaking research regarding how era, values, and defining moments shaped leaders, Bennis and Thomas (2002) concluded that there is one sentence in their findings that must be swiped with a yellow highlighter: “To the extent that any single quality determines success, that quality is adaptation capacity” (91). Adaptive capacity is a self-governing disposition essential in understanding context and seizing

opportunities in navigating the future. In daily life, adaptive capacity functions as the heart beat of foresight learning capabilities.

Learning to Adapt to Complex Environments and Societal Disruptions

How to Survive: Self-Reliance in Extreme Circumstances (Hudson 2021) recounts a series of astonishing feats of stamina and ingenuity, including that of Salvador Alvarenga, the world's longest documented survivor at sea. Salvador spent 438 days drifting across the Pacific Ocean when his fishing trip went awry in 2012. For teachers and students, this readable book's takeaways offer insights related to the ability to understand context and seize opportunities in perilous circumstances that transfer well beyond calamity. Specifically, Hudson argues that coping with dire circumstances in life depends on what he calls the Survival Triangle: *Work, hope, and plan*. *Work* involves at least a minimum of effort to change your circumstances to begin to feel some measure of control. That feeling of control ignites a spark of *hope*. On the basis of hope, one can *plan* further measures to save oneself, leading yet to further concrete actions. Instructionally, the Survival Triangle is both an inspirational and practical answer to the question, "Can students be taught the foresight capabilities that will allow them to adapt to complex environments, societal disruptions, and dire circumstances?"

For students, Hudson's (2021) virtuous circle reinforces the foresight learning capabilities anchored in sustaining realistic optimism, keeping busy, and doing everything possible to maintain or increase feelings of control and progress. *Lost on a Mountain in Maine* (Fendler and Egan 1992) underscores this notion of realistic optimism in chronicling the ordeal of a twelve-year-old child lost on Maine's Mount Katahdin for nine days. In July, 1939, the child became separated from his hiking party in the fog and rain on Maine's highest mountain. During the next several days, he encountered black bears, endured countless mosquito bites, survived a tumble down an embankment, and lost his jeans and shoes. Inspired by his Boy Scout training, he survived by drinking from a stream and eating wild berries. As the child encountered a series of unforeseen surprises and shocks, his behavior radiated *resilience*---a belief that one can influence one's surroundings and the outcome of events by reappraising situations, regulating emotions, and bringing to bear the practical knowledge and skills that one has developed in everyday life (Zolli and Healy 2013). The instructional implication for contemporary educators is that while resilience is a natural capacity, students can be taught to cultivate its growth by becoming more in touch with themselves and more aware of the world around them, particularly involving relationships and interdependencies in dire circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Confronting the Unknowable in Life: A Key Foresight Learning Capability

Storytelling is universal. Storytelling is one of the very few human traits that are truly universal across culture and through all of human history. In everyday life, "stories express how and why life changes" (McKee 2003, 52). In preparing today's students to confront the unknowable in life, the Stockdale Paradox is an especially *compelling story*. Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest-ranking United States military officer in the "Hanoi Hilton" prisoner-of-war camp during the height of the Vietnam War. During his eight-year imprisonment, he was tortured more than twenty times, living out the war without any

prisoner's rights, no release date, and no certainty that he would even survive to see his family again (Collins 2001). When Jim Collins asked, "Who didn't make it out?" Admiral Stockdale replied, 'Oh, that's easy, the optimists.' 'Oh, they were the ones who said, we're going to be out by Christmas. And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, were going to be out by Easter. And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart' (Collins, 2005, 85). In the midst of deprivation and torture, Admiral Stockdale sensed piercingly that unchecked optimism is a human weakness which can lead to disaster. In contrast, among the most lasting gifts that an educator can share inspirationally with one's students in toning foresight capabilities is an evocative refrain: "Retain faith that you can prevail in the end, while still exercising the discipline required to confront the brutal facts in your environment" (Collins 2005). The instructional implication for students is that retaining faith that you can get through a disruption or crisis triggers resilience. In the everydayness of life, individuals survive, learn, adapt, and thrive as a result of the core foresight learning capability of *dynamic resilience* (McNulty 2014).

The Human Network Effect: A Core Foresight Learning Capability

One of the most audacious, moving, complex, and successful rescue operations in history relied not on a single technology or hero but on the collaboration of 10, 000 people from more than 20 nations, working together in a spontaneous network (Hobsbawm 2018). The eyes of the world were focused on the Tham Luang cave system in Thailand, near the border with Myanmar. The Wild Boars soccer team comprised of 12 boys and their coach, who had ventured into the caves about two weeks earlier, were trapped on a rock ledge deep inside. In the midst of the monsoon season, water was rising and oxygen levels were falling. Not all of the boys could swim. With time running out, Elon Musk proposed building a "kid-sized submarine" to assist in the rescue effort. Musk's solution was politely declined by Thai authorities as "not practical." Instead, a spontaneous network of experts from armies, navies, and caving used drones, sonar scanners and radios operating on multiple frequencies together with flexible stretchers that were carried, slid, and zip-lined over treacherous waters to bring the boys out safely one by one.

The instructional implication for students is that in dire situations, such as the Wild Boars' story, networks frequently come together to use technology, community, and communications to ensure human and environmental sustainability. In practice, these networks rely operationally on collective self-management and functioning collaboration. In confronting the COVID-19 infectious disease, the core foresight learning capabilities of self-management and functioning collaboration have also proven vital in driving the world's response to the global pandemic.

Discussion

In instructional settings, feelings of hope and fear stir the impulse of dialogue in complex environments. It is the amplification of dialogic impulses that thoughtful educators rightly insist upon calling teaching and learning. The ability to understand how the world looks to another person is an essential skill in the social environment of the classroom. Reflecting dialogically about what students and educators are doing

together and how they are in *relationship with each other* is a determinative foresight learning capability in enlisting others in common cause---the development of society.

Perspective-taking is a core foresight learning capability. In a classroom environment, “perspective taking is crucial to effective communication” in bridging differences, finding common ground, and expressing empathy (Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2016, p. 34). Paradoxically, societal disruptions and crises represent distinctive opportunities to bring clarity to instructional environments in which teachers and students are engaged in perspective-taking by becoming more in touch with themselves and more aware of the world around them, including instructional relationships and interdependencies.

Developing foresight learning capabilities for both educators and students is profoundly challenging because one must be open to the possibility of changing oneself. The possibility of changing oneself is heightened dramatically when students dialogically pose inquiries such as: “How do I matter in this class?” “To what degree is the culture of this class invented by my presence in it?” “Does our work in this class really stand for something meaningful in the development of society?” “As an educator, how can you make a difference in students’ lives now?” “What impact can you truly have on our lives in years to come?” “What would be lost if this school went out of business?”

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