

Becoming a Future-Proof Teacher: Futures Education Integrated in a Teacher in Training Program

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Abstract

The Teacher in Training program at the Windesheim University of Applied Science believes that education should have a more pro-active role in society and should be aimed at the future. They therefore introduced Futures Thinking into the curriculum. This article describes the process of integration and the obtained results including the cultural change and the impact on students.

Keywords

future proof teacher, teacher in training program, futures education, future of education, futures thinking, teach the future

Introduction

Windesheim is one of the biggest universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands with two locations, one in Zwolle and one in Almere. They have 56 different programs, one of which is a four-year teacher-in-training program for students that want to become teachers. Within this program, they are actively promoting sustainable development because they are part of the Duurzame PABO, a network for teacher training institutes that inspires their teachers to work toward a sustainable future. New in their curriculum is a future program, a three-day program about futures thinking. They are one of the first teacher-in-training programs in the world that are actively integrating futures thinking into their teaching.

The Reason to Introduce Futures Thinking

Windesheim has chosen to introduce futures thinking because they feel education often lags behind. Society continuously changes which

puts pressure on schools because outsiders demand that schools' curriculum addresses the latest developments and possible directions. As a result, schools are always running behind, period. By the time they have incorporated the latest development in their curriculum, new relevant themes become apparent.

Windesheim thinks that education should have a more pro-active role in society, that it should shape society. Schools should be very aware of what is going on in society. For that reason, Windesheim believes it is so important to teach futures thinking. It teaches the students to be responsive to a changing society instead of only teaching a predetermined curriculum. Teaching futures thinking is a way that helps students develop meta-cognitive

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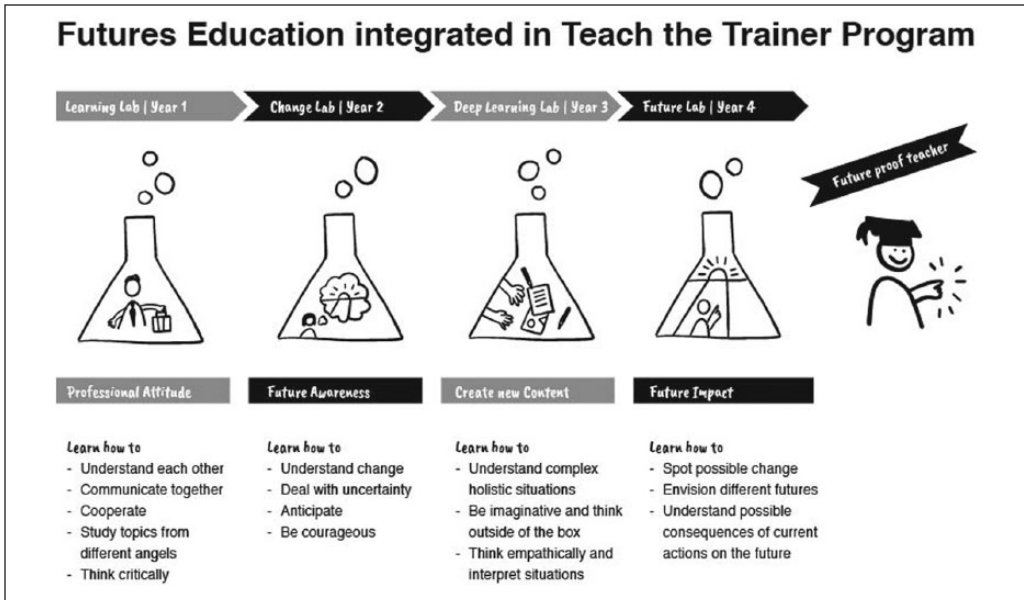


Figure 1. Set-up of Futures Education integrated in Teach the Trainer Program.

skills, self-regulating mechanisms that help them give direction and shape their own thinking and learning process. When they learn meta-cognitive skills, how to observe, analyze and create, they will realize they are not only reproducers but also producers. It shows them that they can form the system and contribute in a very specific and obvious way to the development of society, short- and long-term. It is important that they take responsibility for this important role and take ownership. What they do matters, not just what they are accountable for in the short term.

Their Futures Program

The first time Windesheim introduced futures thinking into their curriculum was for their fourth-year students at the end of their normal classes and before their final internship. They organized the “future week” (two days preparation, three days at location) with the intention to let students analyze society and reflect on their role as a professional in education. The program brought together sixty students and five teachers in a remote location. They picked this location outside because they wanted to exclude the students from other

activities and make sure they were fully immersed in the program. The students had to prepare for the future week by bringing signals they felt where “signals of change,” new ideas or innovations that could be game changers for sustainability.

The program at location had the following content:

- Day 1: The students were asked to investigate trends and developments. Specifically, they were asked to suggest societal changes and to think about the potential influence these might have on education. After they categorized the trends in certainties, uncertainties and their high and low influence with the help of an impact tool, they jointly made two-scenario axes of driving forces—open versus closed educational system and equal versus unequal opportunities in society. This resulted in four quadrants, each scenario a window into a potential future.
- Day 2: In groups, the students studied one of the developed scenarios, debated the implications and discussed these consequences. During these sessions, a

guest lecturer, a specialist in sustainability and future thinking, joined these groups to keep them on their toes by asking in-depth questions. This resulted in a very in-depth understanding of their scenario at the end of the day.

- Day 3: Each group presented their scenario with the intention that during the presentation the audience would experience this specific window into the future and really feel the impact of this scenario on their everyday life at school. It clearly showed that the future of education can take different forms, depending on the choices we make now. Following they discussed the four scenarios together and addressed questions like “Which scenario do you believe would be the most likely to happen?” “Which scenario is your preferred scenario?” “Which scenario would you definitely reject?” and “What is the impact you have on each scenario becoming reality?”

After the program, the students started their final internship. They were asked to take the results of the future week and share them with their director, colleagues, or pupils. They could give their own interpretation to this assignment. In a final session after the students returned from their internship, they shared their experiences and their lessons learned.

How Did the Students Experience Future Week?

The students felt it was a nice but also a very strenuous experience. Some even said they had “fried brains.” Most of them wished they had learned more about futures thinking earlier in their program. One student said, “It was very difficult in the beginning, but the more we got into it the more sense everything made.”

For some students it was difficult to apply what they had learned in their internship. They had not completely internalized it themselves and therefore found it hard to apply to their new setting. Others really embraced it and actively integrated it in their internship. One student mentioned that it helped her think about the type of

school she would like to work at. Although discussing the possible future scenarios with the school management of the school she was interning at, she realized the importance of the match of the vision of the school and her own vision on education. Others discussed the results with their pupils (elementary school) and felt that their pupils were much better at anticipating and thinking freely about the future than they themselves were. This raised the interesting question of why this happened.

How Did the Teachers Experience Future Week?

Future week was challenging not only for the students but also for the teachers. Teaching futures thinking is complicated, interesting, and exciting at the same time. The teachers also did not know what the scenarios would look like, whether the students would embrace the challenge and whether they would stay engaged. The teachers had to improvise and deal with challenges as they came up.

We teach the future to help students make better decisions today. Unlike the traditional curriculum where there is a “correct” answer and the amount of correct answers determines students’ performance. When teaching futures it is not about the “correct” answer as it is not clear what the “correct” answer is, only the future will tell. Although decisions may have better or worse outcomes, the purpose of teaching foresight is not to make the “correct” decision, but rather to make the best possible decision under the circumstances. As a result we need to bring about a culture of change in education, where high quantitative scores are no longer equated with high quality education.

The teachers also knew that they would not reach every student. Some students will be lost along the way (which is ok because they will not be the ones shaping the changes in the education system). Some will be inspired, and some will become active supporters and the innovators of the future. It is important to not get discouraged by the ones you lose but to get motivated by the ones you touch. For many teachers the future week reminded them why they are so excited to work with students.

Lessons Learned and Future Development

The most important lesson learned from the future week was that introducing future thinking in the fourth year is too late. As a result, Windesheim worked hard to build a more integrated way to introduce futures thinking to their students. Currently this is the intended set up, partly already applied (Figure 1):

- Year 1: Learning Lab—learn how to understand each other, communicate together, and cooperate. Focus on the ability to tackle new topics and think critically which should result in the development of a professional attitude.
- Year 2: Change Lab—learn how to understand change, deal with uncertainty and anticipate it. Focus on the ability to be courageous. Integrate these topics in your lesson plan for your internship, which should result in future awareness.
- Year 3: Deep Learning Lab—learn how to understand complex holistic situations, use your imagination and train your empathic skills. This should result in being able to create your own new content. (This part has not been finalized).
- Year 4: Future Lab—learn how to study new developments and envision different futures. Learn to see what the consequences of your current actions on the future are. Understand your impact on change.

Advise to Other Schools

To integrate future thinking in the curriculum you need to have a long-term perspective. It is not something you do overnight. If you keep on making small changes, you will see the culture slowly shifting. Instead of having teachers and students that are focused on the past, you will have teachers and students that are focused on the future. Not everybody will move at the same pace or in the same way but that is ok, as long as we are all moving forward. We need to embrace the challenges and mistakes that are being made and work together to not fall back

into our old routines. Importantly, do not let yourself be led by the accreditation system. Keep believing in your future vision. Dare to take risks and embrace the uncertainty; it is part of life. Finally, do not stop when you have a setback. If you believe in what you are doing, keep on going and learn to trust yourself.

Make sure you have the support of your superior; they need to see the value of this program and trust that in the long-term all the effort will result in more empowered students. And dare to listen to your students, their comments, and suggestions. They will tell you what was exciting, what they wished they had learned at an earlier stage, and what did not make sense to them. This information allows you to make adjustments.

As Marcel states, “Be the change you wish to see in your students. You are a role model.”

Authors’ Note

This article is based on an interview with Marcel Staring, teacher/educator at the teacher in training program at Windesheim, and initiator of their future program, conducted by Erica Bol, specialist in integrating futures thinking into education. For a short video about the Future Week check (in Dutch): www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc52InHRgRU&t=41s

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Erica Bol is the founder and CEO of Teach the Future Europe. She works as a change maker and is passionate about integrating future’s thinking into education because she believes this will help us move towards a better and more sustainable future. She is an expert in foresight and education.

Marcel Staring works as a sustainable pilot at the Windesheim Teacher in Training Program. He is dedicated to improve education. He has more than 10 years experience in the field.