

Future•cation

A new way to describe our goal

By Marc Prensky

Published in Educational Technology Nov-Dec 2013

[868 words]

We are all searching for ways to move our schools more quickly forward into the future. As the coiner of a term (“Digital Natives”) which had a big effect on how people see the world, I now have another suggestion for language “shorthand” we can employ to quickly convey what we want educators to do—and what we don’t want them to do.

I suggest every school and teacher adopt “**Future•cation**” as one of their primary goals. If someone asks: “What do you do here?” the answer is “We don’t just educate—we Future•cate.”

Future•cation means consciously re-balancing our education away from being only past-oriented to being far more future-oriented than it is today.

Part of Future•cating, of course, is moving quickly to the tools of today and tomorrow.

But Future•cation goes way beyond that—Future•cating also means viewing technology as the “new foundation” of our education—on the same par with the reading and writing from the past. We won’t stop reading and writing, but we all need to be seeking a better balance between the old foundations of education and the new. “Is what I teach really what my kids need to learn?” recently tweeted a teacher. In too many cases the answer is no. At its heart, Future•cating is educating with an eye on — in addition to the tests and the current curriculum — the real things our kids need in their future, as we, their educators, perceive them.

No More “Past-ucation”

The opposite of Future•cation is “Past-ucation.” “Past-ucating” is continuing to do things in only the “old” ways. It’s continuing to value the old over the new, rather than trying to seriously rebalance for the world of tomorrow.

Last year my son had a “Past-ucator” for his second-grade teacher. She was not comfortable with technology and never accorded it much importance. Her classroom was little different than my own second grade classroom 60 years ago. The four computers on the side of her classroom room were rarely turned on. There were no computer-generated pictures or writing on the classroom walls. There was no balance between the expository and non-fiction writing of the past, and the technology and graphics-based communication of the future. When my son was finally allowed to make a PowerPoint presentation, it consisted of his written paper pasted in, with a couple of pictures. He read his text to the class word for word.

The worst part about Past-ucation is that the Past-ucators’ biases are communicated every day—consciously and unconsciously—to their students. My son tells me that asking Siri to find a definition for him is “cheating,” and that Wikipedia “lies.” From where does he get these ideas? Not from home.

A “New Balance”

Education is not just about preserving our collective past, but about preparing our kids for their future. In times when the future changed relatively slowly, it was good enough for educators to be the passers-on of the content and skills of yesterday. But we all know the future is arriving at an accelerating rate, and that the world our kids will live in will be profoundly different from today’s. Our job as educators is to prepare them for that world.

We certainly must teach the past—but we cannot make it the only basis for our education. Today we require a “new balance” between the old and the new. More and more educators are now seeking that new balance, realizing that Past-ucation—even when done well—is not enough. For our kids’ sake, we must expose unmitigated and unrepentant “Past-ucating” when we see it, and designate “Past-ucation-only” as something that we can no longer tolerate. The more we rely on Past-ucation (and that includes “new ways to do the old stuff”) the less we are preparing our kids for their future, and the more we are handicapping them.

Future•cation: Our Common Goal

To ensure our kids are as ready as they can be, our common goal must be to Future•cate as much and as often as possible—with every teacher, school, district and even country finding their own path. A useful way to evaluate anything we do (or ask others to do) as an educator is to ask ourselves “Is this Future•cation? Or is it Past-ucation? Almost all of us can tell the difference.

Long-term, I believe that the best way to balance the needs of past and the future is to replace today curriculum with the far more basic skills of Effective Thinking, Effective Action, Effective Relationships and Effective Accomplishment—all enhanced, extended and enabled by all the powerful tools and technologies of the 21st century and beyond.

We have already begun to do this by emphasizing basic skills like “critical thinking,” and “creativity.” But we can, and must, go much further. Acting, relating and accomplishing skills (“entrepreneurship” for example) will be far more important in the future.

I submit “Future●cation” as a handy term for quickly communicating where it is we want to go — and “Past-ucation” as a term for what to avoid. I believe Future●cation is a useful goal for all of us — technologists, schools, parents, and particularly students — to demand from all educators and rally around.

Marc Prensky—author of the 2001 article Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants—is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, consultant, and game designer in the field of education. He is the author of five books: From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom (Corwin, 2012) Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning (Corwin, 2010), Don’t Bother Me, Mom, I’m Learning (Paragon House, 2006), Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw Hill, 2001) and Brain Gain: Technology and the Quest for Digital Wisdom (Palgrave MacMillan 2012). His upcoming sixth book “New Basics and New Balance” is on the subject of future curriculum

Marc is the co-founder of Spree Learning Games, a new “curricular games” company. He holds an MBA from Harvard and a Masters in Teaching from Yale. Many of his writings can be found at www.marcprensky.com/writing. Contact Marc at marcprensky@gmail.com.