The Vision Thing

I’ve recently developed a minor obsession. And since it’s better to give than receive, I thought it only right that I pass it along to you.

Blame it on George

George Lucas, that is. The person who brought us Star Wars and Indiana Jones has plans to develop some videos that will provide points of discussion and departure for considerations of what children’s lives in school may one day look like. The George Lucas Educational Foundation has been inviting groups of educators, technologists, futurists, and media makers to his facilities at Skywalker Ranch in northern California. There, they have the opportunity to hold freewheeling discussions about what education might look like in the relatively near future — at one recent meeting the year was pegged at 2020. Lucas himself sits in at these meetings, taking notes, occasionally joining in the discussion, but essentially just listening to what others have to say.

One tentative strategy for coalescing and disseminating these visions is by providing the resulting videos to professional educational organizations, where they could be freely copied and distributed. (N.B.: Plans change. Please do not assume that this “draft” of a distribution strategy will be identical to the final version.)

I personally found the particular discussion I participated in fascinating and rewarding — in no small measure because I had the chance to join with people like George Leonard, Brenda Laurel, and Paul Saffo, whose work has helped shape my own visions involving education and technology. The problem is that the task Lucas has set for himself — how to translate people’s words into stories and images — seems very difficult. (Of course, it need hardly be noted, I’m no George Lucas.) I’ve seen lots of attempts to portray on video “the future of technology in education,” from the fictional “Knowledge Navigator,” “High School 2000,” and “The DynaBook,” to taped demos of current technology-rich projects and programs. While many of these have been thought provoking (not always in the manner that was intended), none has been compelling, inspiring, illuminating, or challenging to the degree or in a manner that would qualify them as “visionary.”

It’s difficult, in fact, for me to think of specific examples of “futuristic” educational settings. We often see portrayed the results rather than the process of education (or the lack of it). In many cases, “education” amounts to pumping information into the brain, either through drugs, implants, or
rapid displays of images and text. Too often, education in the future is simply a higher tech version of education in the past: acquisition of facts, perhaps even knowledge, but little direct attention to the development of understanding, judgment, or wisdom.

However, the more I’ve thought about it — and I can’t stop thinking about it — the more difficult it’s seemed to me to figure out how to show (not tell) someone what a compelling vision might be. It seems such an interesting problem, however, that I’m glad to have this opportunity to pass the challenge on.

Some Parts Before the Whole

First, a little background. In an earlier issue of The Quarterly (Fall 1990), I made some predictions about how technology would affect the teaching of writing. Here’s some of what I had to say:

- People would stop confusing real paper with the simulated paper of word processing screens. Computers would become the medium in which documents were both created and “read” (which has come to include being watched and listened to). We would think of “word processing” less and less as just an intermediate stage on the way to a printout.

- More education would take place in the home through instructional databases and telecommunications networks. Many of these would be provided by commercial sources, not educational institutions. (I missed the possibility that commercial sources like Whittle’s Channel One and the Edison Project would appear in and as educational institutions.)

- Writing labs would become like studio art courses, in which instructors could monitor and give immediate feedback on students’ developing texts — and have their advice almost as quickly incorporated into the emerging documents.

- Software that generated its own text would change the nature of writer-text-reader relationships. (While I had in mind systems like IBM’s EPISTLE project, I’d now include the tendency for student papers at some schools to be artifacts that are patched together from previous students’ work that has been stored on disks.)

My point here is not to dwell on whether or not my predictions were accurate—feel free to fine-tune, add, or omit items. Instead, the point is that by focusing your attention on the future and by putting your thoughts into writing, you bring insight and expertise to bear on an area of some significance—in short, you generate visions both of and for the future. (And as Charles Kettering suggests, “We should all be concerned about the future, because we’re going to be spending the rest of our lives there.”)

The kinds of stories and visions that George Lucas hopes to create are generated from questions about where education will take place, and when, and how, and toward what ends. Questions about what we want and don’t want.

What’s Mine Can Be Yours

I mentioned above that I had developed a minor obsession. It has to do not only with how vision is generated but how it is communicated. How, after all, can we communicate our vision to others?

Some do it by writing about it. Some do it by example, by modeling what they hope others will come to understand (“If you build it, they will come.”) Others, like Lucas, have an extraordinary ability to tell stories.

National Writing Project teachers have unique perspectives and expertise, so it’s only right that you should get a difficult assignment. I won’t ask you to do much, just a little exercise to help focus your vision.

THE ONLY THING I’M ASKING YOU TO DO

Think about a significant change or trend that will occur during the next fifteen years resulting from the use of technology for the teaching of writing. Write it down and rate this change or trend on the following scale:

1=Really Bothers Me
2=Bothers Me
3=I’m Undecided/Ambivalent
4=Glad About This
5=Really Glad About This

Send me your prediction. Mail it to: Stephen Marcus, SCWriP, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106.

I won’t be able to respond to individual letters. What I will do is read them carefully and report in a future issue of The Quarterly what some of the most thoughtful and insightful educators (you know who you are) have to say about the future of technology in the teaching of

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writing. I’ll look for the trends in your comments. I’ll look for optimists and pessimists. I’ll look for ideas both bright and heartfelt. I’ll reflect to you the ways in which you see your future in front of you or inside of you.

What we see in the future can also be a reflection of our past. Our view of where we are and where we’re going is often determined by our image of where we’ve been. I might also add that it’s a lot safer to predict the past. So here’s another assignment for you.

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THE ONLY OTHER THING
I’M ASKING YOU TO DO
Think about a significant change or trend that has already occurred during the last fifteen years resulting from the use of technology for the teaching of writing. Write it down and rate this change or trend on the following scale:

1=Really Bothers Me
2=Bothers Me
3=I’m Undecided/Ambivalent
4=Glad About This
5=Really Glad About This

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Send me your comments. Mail it to me at the address given you on page 16. Be sure you make clear which comments refer to the future and which refer to the past. As I noted above, I won’t be able to respond to individual comments, but I will be able to reflect a view of your collective wisdom. I’ll only add that you should feel free to respond to only one of the assignments, past or future, if you don’t want to take on both of them.

What’s Yours Can Be Ours
The future of technology in education is as uncertain now as it has always been, and pessimists note that history provides ample evidence for questioning the desirability of “technological progress.” The optimistic view is that computers and related technologies are providing new and increasingly rich environments that both enhance and transform students’ and educators’ capacities.

The stability and vitality of our profession depend on talented educators who acquire and sustain an informed vision of what they’re doing and why. Those individuals will be a major force in making the most of what the technology and their students offer them.

Fortunately, we don’t have to solve George Lucas’s problem, not that I won’t keep thinking about it—and somehow I think he’ll be up to the task. We have our own problems and promises to keep. I hope you’ll join me in helping focus on at least a portion of the National Writing Project vision, one that identifies what has been and what may be important factors in determining the quality of life and learning in the teaching of writing.