Teaching the future: learning strategies and student challenges

Ian Seymour Yeoman and Una McMahon-Beatte

Abstract

Purpose – *How do you teach the future when it has not happened yet? The purpose of this paper is to delve into the teaching and learning philosophies of Futurist Dr Ian Yeoman of Victoria University of Wellington who emphasises authenticity, problem-based learning, visuals as creative tools and students' negotiating problems.*
Design/methodology/approach – *This paper is a reflective account of the Author Dr Ian Yeoman as a human instrument.*
Findings – *The paper overviews three papers taught by the Author Dr Ian Yeoman – TOUR104 is a first-year introductory course addressing how the drivers and trends in the macro environment influence tourism from a political, economic, social, technology and environment perspective. TOUR301 is a third-year course as part of the bachelor of tourism management degree. The course aims to help students develop the skills and knowledge necessary to understand and critically analyse tourism public policy, planning and processes within New Zealand and a wider context. TOUR413 is a scenario planning paper, applied in a tourism context and taught to students in postgraduate programs.*
Originality/value – *The paper examines different learning tools and strategies in order to deliver the philosophy with scaffolding and incremental learning featuring predominantly in this approach.*

Keywords *Pedagogy, Scenario planning, Futures, Problem-based learning*
Paper type *Viewpoint*

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Introduction

It was Flechtheim (1945) who told us that Cassandra foretold the fall of Troy and Jeremiah prophesized the doom of Jerusalem. Throughout history, soothsayers, prophets and wizards have stirred the masses with pictures and predictions of the future. But how do these prophets understand the future, how did they learn and who taught them? This working paper is not about the prophets, doomsday merchants or crystal ball gazers. But a personal reflection of how one academic teaches the future of tourism. Dr Ian Yeoman is an Associate Professor of Tourism Futures at the Victoria University of Wellington; this is his story of teaching and learning based upon the following principles:

- a student-centred approach to learning rather than teacher focussed;

- the role of authentic learning in simulating a real-work environment;

- problem-based learning in which the student negotiates his/her own learning, sets boundaries and negotiates problems and resolves issues; and

- the use of problem-structuring methods to visualise learning.

The paper overviews these principles drawn from a number of taught undergraduate and postgraduate tourism courses/modules.

Teaching the future

Teaching the future is not a new topic, beyond the soothsayers of Cassandra bodies such as the World Futures Society and World Futures Studies Federation have "been involved in university

and professional courses since the early 1960s (Eldredge, 1970; Rojas, 1970; Masini, 1971). When Toffler (1975) published *Learning for Tomorrow*, the world took notice a given Toffler's celebrity status in the popular culture. The book represented the first attempt to document the historical development of futures studies in higher education from across a range of disciplines in humanities, science, business and social science. Toffler's contribution was a call for education to embrace the future in order to understand its unfolding. What is important is that educators must use future frameworks to allow students delve and explore their own learnings. This approach to understanding the future, placing an emphasis not on teaching the future but an educational philosophy and epistemology approach that embraces student leaning is what the authors advocate in this paper. Since then, other books have included Kauffman (1976), Slaughter (1993), Dator (2002), Hicks (2002) and Gidley (2005). Most recently Bishop and Hines' (2012) book *Teaching About the Future* is a noteworthy contribution which follows the formulas of success from the University of Houston, USA and Swinburne University of Technology, Australia. The book embeds the postgraduate education programmes used to teach foresight students using models, systems theory, mapping the future and how to influence the future. The book is the most comprehensive account to date of higher education futures curriculum development. Finland has always adopted a futures perspective in society, The University of Turku[1] Master's programme is one of the earliest and well regarded degree programmes. The programmes set out to educate foresight experts in the both qualitative and quantitative approaches to designing the future. One of the most common research methods is scenario planning (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2002), which is typically embedded in many MBA degrees and strategic management courses. This approach to constructing the future is used by European Tourism Futures Institute (www.etfi.eu) and NHL Stenden of Applied Sciences www.nhlstenden.com in many of their bachelor and masters degrees in tourism and leisure management. In the remaining sections of this paper, the authors explain what they do at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

TOUR104: the business environment of tourism

TOUR104 is a first-year introductory course addressing how the drivers and trends in the macro environment influence tourism from a political, economic, social, technology and environment perspective. Topics covered are very broad from economic drivers such as disposal income and exchange rates to technological trends such as ubiquitous computing and Moore's Law drawn from the course reader *2050: Tomorrows Tourism* (Yeoman, 2012a). The course emphasis the "good" and "bad" issues of tourism using dilemma frameworks. At the heart of the learning strategy are two tools – learning questions (Long *et al.*, 2015) and mind maps (Noonan, 2013). A series of learning questions are posted on Blackboard (intranet) each week to reflect lectures, tutorials and readings. These learning questions are the basis of tutorial activity and student study groups. They are an effective tool in bringing structured learning to the course, thus enabling students to scaffold their learning (Raymond, 2012). A portfolio is used for the summative assessment. Students complete five learning questions over seven weeks and then complete a critical reflection demonstrating the interconnectivity of tourism trends. The second tool is mind mapping. Students are encouraged to structure their answers using mind maps in a variety of ways. These include the time within lectures for students to summarise their lecture notes, answering learning questions using mind maps or tutorial activities focussed on group maps.

Key challenges from a student perspective

These include developing student skills in mind mapping and visual learning, especially international students, emphasising the importance of mind mapping as a learning tool in order that students see the benefits to enhance their learning and establishing student ownership for personal considerations of the future. As one student noted, "The future of tourism of tourism has to be more than Yeoman's writing"!

TOUR301: tourism policy and planning

TOUR301 is a third-year course as part of the bachelor of tourism management degree. The course aims to help students develop the skills and knowledge necessary to understand and

critically analyse tourism public policy, planning and processes within New Zealand and a wider context (Yeoman *et al.*, 2016). The central theme running through the course, from a pedagogical perspective it is about developing student's skills in applying policy and planning frameworks, hence the paper uses scenario planning and soft systems methodology (SSM) (Checkland, 1981) as envisioning and analysis tools. Given the location of Victoria University of Wellington as New Zealand's capital city, a number of guest speakers from government departments, industry associations and local government discuss the key issues and challenges in tourism policy and planning. The teaching philosophy is based on authenticity, problem-based learning and negotiation. Students find this style of learning new and different. The teaching of TOUR301 defines the teacher as a facilitator providing the students with a structure through SSM as the framework. Through facilitation, the teacher is a supporter, director, providing guidelines and creating dialogue for learning. Following SSM's seven-stage process allows the students to construct their own learning through negotiation and problem solving. Facilitation is about guiding, setting direction and providing feedback. Students take responsibility for their own learning and working with others in order to achieve an outcome. SSM allows students a degree of abstraction through "rich pictures" and experimentation through conceptual models (policy solutions). SSM deals with ambiguous problems which allow the students to negotiate their understanding of the problem. This includes negotiation with students, as they often work in small groups in tutorials. The teacher acts as a "clarifier" where problem situations are not understood or need clarification.

Key challenges from a student perspective

The first challenge is that problem-based learning is a new method of learning to many students in a traditional university environment, especially international students. Second, SSM is a visual learning method which incorporates structuring problems through cartoon style diagrams. This approach is not for everyone. A common student complaint is that, "We are not artists". Third, is the use of political ideologies to distinguish between policy perspectives is challenging. A student protested once, "If I wanted to do a degree in politics I would have studied it".

TOUR413: scenarios for world tourism

TOUR413 is a scenario planning paper applied in a tourism context and taught to students in postgraduate programs at the Victoria University of Wellington. The learning strategy puts the students at the centre of the learning process through an action-based research method. Students engage with key stakeholder, leaders and experts to construct a range of scenarios about the future. The problems are of importance to the New Zealand stakeholders and Victoria University of Wellington's proximity to government and industry allows the students to gain access in real time with the senior industry leaders (Yeoman, 2012b). Example of projects include: 2030: The Future of Wellington i-sites; 2050: The Future of Wellington Food Festivals – An International Perspective; 2030: The Future of Regional Tourism Organisations, etc.

For any project, four scenarios are constructed and implications analysed using Hiejden's (2002) scenario method which involves literature reviews, interviewing stakeholders, scenario evaluation and construction workshops and report presentations. The learning process incorporates a multidisciplinary approach, with students drawing knowledge from different fields. The central learning tool used for assessment is student preparation assignments (SPAs). These short weekly assignments break down complex tasks, allowing students to scaffold their learning. This method originates from Vygoysky's sociocultural theory and his concept of "zone of proximal development" (Raymond, 2012). The SPAs are posted to a blog and feedback is provided from the lecturer and further peer review from students, who comment on each other's blogs.

Key challenges from a student perspective

SPAs as a tool for learning are a valuable education instrument but students indicate that it puts a lot of pressure on them to complete weekly tasks. The projects are based on a real-world

environment and the stakeholder client may well be a future employer. This may make the student prioritise the course over others. Additionally, as one student put it there is no wrong answer, "as the future hasn't occurred yet, you cannot find the answer in a book. Conceptualisation is difficult".

Conclusions

This approach to teaching and learning is a reflection of how Dr Ian Yeoman engages with the students across a number of taught courses. Over the last five years that approach has being refined resulting in improved course evaluations by students. What is clear is that imprecision and vagueness of the future is both realistic and useful, as it encourages students to search, define and negotiate their own understanding of the problem. Thus, the teacher is more of a facilitator than a traditional teacher. What is important is giving the students appropriate frameworks so that they can solve the problem, e.g. mind maps, rich pictures or scenario planning matrices. The power of group learning and study support should not be underestimated. Using mind maps in this context, students can easily see the connections and pathways to the answers. Incremental learning and scaffolding are important features of engaging with students to break down daunting tasks and assignments. In summary, this approach to learning, gives the students structure through a learning journey approach.

Note

1. www.utu.fi/en/units/ffrc/studying/FutureMasters/Pages/home.aspx

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Dr Ian Seymour Yeoman is an Associate Professor at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand specialising in the future of travel and tourism. Dr Ian learned his trade as the Scenario Planner for VisitScotland where he established the process of futures thinking within the organisation using a variety of techniques including economic modelling, trends analysis and scenario construction. He has undertaken similar work across the globe including most recently in Norway, the Netherlands and New Zealand. Ian has a PhD Degree in Operations Research from the Napier University, Edinburgh and BSc (Hons) Degree in Catering Systems from Sheffield City Polytechnic. Dr Ian is the Editor of the *Journal of Revenue and Pricing Management* and the Co-editor of the *Journal of Tourism Futures.* He has published extensively in leading journals and is the Author and Co-editor of 18 books including the *The Future of Food Tourism*, *2050: Tomorrows Tourism* and *The Future of Events and Festivals*. Ian holds honorary positions at the Sheffield Hallam University, Ulster University and the European Tourism Futures Institute. Dr Ian Seymour Yeoman is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ian.yeoman@vuw.ac.nz

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