

Futures Education and the Ideal Future Self-Narrative¹

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I am going to explain an educational activity I use to facilitate the enhancement of future consciousness. It is the central activity I use in my workshop on enhancing future consciousness. The idea is relatively simple and straightforward: Ask participants to construct a concise self-narrative beginning, but also building on the past and continuing into the future. The future narrative to be constructed should be an ideal or preferable future narrative focusing on the pursuit and development of character virtues in the future. Finally, this future narrative should not just focus on self-development but also describe how, through the pursuit of virtue, participants could contribute to the evolution of humanity; that is, participants need to connect their personal future with the future of humanity.

Psychological research indicates that writing out and making explicit one's basic life story helps individuals bring meaning, clarity, and order to their lives. It helps people to identify their strengths, accomplishments, and values. It helps people to come to terms with challenges, problems, difficulties, and painful experiences in their life – to make sense of it all. People are naturally drawn to the vehicle of the story (or narrative) as both a meaning-making and a personally-inspiring mode of thinking and expression; we psychologically resonate with stories. In fact, according to numerous researchers, we tend to construct our sense of self-identity in terms of an ongoing narrative which we continually revise and embellish through our lives; Antonio Damasio calls this inner psychological reality, which gives our conscious minds mental coherence and purpose, our “autobiographical self.” But our autobiographical self not only incorporates the story of our past - it connects this past narrative with some sense of where we are going in the future. That is, the inner self-narrative we all possess, covering past, present, and future, brings temporal coherence and meaning to our lives.

Now it is clear that our inner self-narrative can be more or less coherent, clear, and organized; we may to different degrees have a fuzzy or disorganized sense of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going. Hence, in attempting to write out a past narrative, we will almost certainly bring some increasing order, clarity, and meaning to our sense of who we are.

But it also seems that our sense of where we are heading – our future self-narrative – is built upon our sense of the past, however clear that is, and consequently, by bringing meaning and order to our past we facilitate the development of a clearer, more realistic and focused sense of our future self. Based on an enhanced sense of your past, how would you describe where you are heading in the future? Further, since the narrative appears to be the preferred and natural mode of conceptualization for self-understanding, especially regarding how humans organize time in their minds, asking participants to

describe their future as a narrative resonates with normal psychological preferences and consequently gives them a clearer, more “user friendly” sense of their future.

Yet, to go a step further, the educational activity requires participants to describe a preferable direction for their future, not simply a prediction or extrapolation from the past. Identifying preferable futures could involve setting concrete goals or imagining ideal future personal scenarios, but the tact that I take is to focus on character development. I do not ask participants to imagine material bounty or prosperity. I ask participants to conceptualize an ideal future defined or described in terms of personal character virtues, such as honesty, wisdom, courage, or optimism.

The identification of character virtues to be pursued in the future can build upon those personal qualities that show up in writing our past self-narrative, but the virtues identified can go beyond those strengths identified in the past; the past may reveal character weaknesses that, if rectified, would facilitate increased happiness and self-fulfillment in the future.

Connecting character virtues with a future self-narrative basically means asking: If one wishes to develop a key virtue in the future what kinds of activities and what kinds of goals should one pursue and, consequently, what kinds of challenges and problems should one expect as well? Note, too, that defining a preferable future in terms of virtues brings an ethical or moral quality into one’s vision of the future. Putting an ethical dimension into preferred future thinking is essential to defining what the good life is for human beings in the future. But also, psychological research indicates that the pursuit and development of virtues is strongly correlated with long term or authentic happiness. To wit, if you want to be happier in the future, become more virtuous.

Further, virtue development as the center of a preferable future brings self-responsibility and increased focus and direction to one’s future; virtues are accomplishments – things achieved; consequently, to realize them a person needs to bring effort, tenacity, purpose, and determination to his or her life. Having purpose and direction as regards the future is strongly correlated with mental health and happiness.

Finally, I have identified a set of key virtues that appear to be supportive, if not necessary, for an enhanced sense of the future. As I have argued, future consciousness is facilitated through the pursuit of such virtues as courage, wisdom, optimism, and self-responsibility. Hence, in focusing on virtues in one’s future, one raises one’s future consciousness. In the activity on creating a preferable future self-narrative, I provide participants with a list of basic human virtues (along with some short illustrations of revered historical figures who epitomized these virtues) that serves as a stimulus point for creating their own list of key virtues.

As a final point, as Aristotle noted long ago, character virtues are not simply self-serving personality traits; invariably virtues connect with the human community. Virtuous people contribute to the betterment of humanity. It seems to me that the identification of preferable futures should go beyond personal ends and should also incorporate concern for others and the world at large. How can a

life of virtue in the future positively impact the future human condition? This is the final question participants need to address.

In conclusion, as a subject in my own study and research on this educational approach to enhancing future consciousness, I have found that articulating a self-narrative, both of the past and of the future, and connecting the elements together, is not a task that can be completed once and for all in an afternoon. As I explain to participants, my hope is that they will start the process of creating and writing a self-narrative during the workshop, but that they will continue to work on it much more extensively afterwards. In fact, the activity can be a semester-long assignment in a course on the future. Making sense of one's life and creating a positive and thoughtful direction for the future clearly deserves both extended time and effort.

¹ Articles for further reading that explain in more depth various ideas introduced in this short paper can be found at my website. For example, see http://www.odysseyofthefuture.net/enhance_fut_cons.htm . Also see, http://www.odysseyofthefuture.net/pdf_files/Readings/EvolvingFutureConscPursuitVirtue.pdf .