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Historians as Futurists

Is history really future studies in reverse? Panel at recent gathering of historians' association ma

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By [Colleen Flaherty](#)





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ATLANTA -- David Hochfelder, associate professor of history at the State University of New York, is introducing a new iteration of an undergraduate course this semester with an image: a 2017 Facebook post (<https://www.facebook.com/technologyreview/photos/a.295233934797.145846.1704354979>) from the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology Review* featuring astronaut and Apollo 11 veteran Buzz Aldrin. "Buzz promised me Mars colonies. Instead, I got Facebook."

It's a provocative statement, and perhaps a perfect hook for Hochfelder's course, called History 101, inspired in part by the [Teach the Future](http://teachthefuture.org) (<http://teachthefuture.org>) foundation, directed by Peter Bishop, a professor of sociology and former director of the Foresight program for future studies at the University of California, San Diego. The foundation promotes training students in high schools, colleges and universities to think about the future in various disciplines. The idea is to make all disciplines more relevant to students' lives, as well to better prepare them for the future.

At the recent annual gathering of the American Historical Association in Atlanta, Bishop, Hochfelder and others teaching the future argued that historians are particularly suited to these kinds of questions (as

Aeronautics and Space Administration took a backseat to Silicon Valley in the public imagination. A moral imperative to adopt the approach.

"You're looking at one direction on the timeline, and we're looking at another direction on the timeline. To describe this to people, they say, 'You can't teach the future because it happened yet,' and I say, 'You can't teach the past, because it doesn't exist, either.' We're all working on the same order of phenomena."

David J. Staley, an associate professor of history at Ohio State University and a part-time futurist, says that "one of the biggest hang-ups historians will have is, 'We can't predict the future, we should just wait.' There's a kind of uncertainty, so there's skepticism and almost a timidity, about venturing a prediction, so you're not going to be taken seriously."

But Staley's work -- inspired by Peter Schwartz's *Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future* -- centers on the notion of scenario planning as a qualitative method for learning about the future -- centers on the historical method, in reverse.

"We can use the historical method -- whatever our specialization -- to train our attention toward the future. The claim isn't just that historians [can do this because they] study the past. How we look at the past is what matters."

Rather than simplifying phenomena to basic models and theories, historians already work with complexity. "They're relatively comfortable dealing in uncertainties," he said.

Bishop said that those in other, obviously futures-oriented fields, such as economics, tend to use more extrapolative techniques than do historians. But with the current speed of information and rate of change, he said, we have what he has called "exponential time" -- the future is assured to be "turbulent," he said. And students preparing for it.

Moreover, students should be asked to think about the future on a more regular basis, Bishop said. "If we're teaching students for the future, shouldn't we be telling them a little bit about the future they're going to face?"

Of course, Bishop and others said, historians work with artifacts, documents and other evidence. "Teaching the future lack. Teach the Future acknowledges that what's ahead is fundamentally uncertain. It provides models for helping instructors help their students think about the future in more rigorous ways. It is simply intuitive. It also crowdsources effective models and teaching materials from like-minded people. It looks for metapatterns in the history of the topic at hand -- whether it's climate change or global inequality. As well as analogies can be helpful in thinking about the future, too.

So how does teaching the future look, in practice? Hochfelder, of Albany, crafted his new course around a topic of interest that they analyze for possible futures in the beginning of the semester -- anything from climate change to global inequality -- and create an annotated bibliography for sources of information about that topic. (*The Economist* panelists' futures reading list.)

Students then begin a semester-long "scanning blog" to help track developments and trends, as far as possible -- the evidence gap they have in predicting the future of that topic. Students eventually write an analysis identifying and assessing the major drivers of change in their subject area, noting how they are likely to further drive or inhibit change. The final project is an eight-to-10-page paper that describes how the world will evolve over the next five, 10 or 50 years. Students are asked to identify their preferred outcomes and the actions they would take to achieve them.

“black swan” scenario with a disproportionate effect on the topic.

Hochfelder said his institution -- like many others -- has made 21st-century challenges a major focus. Most related undergraduate courses are decidedly 20th-century oriented. So the idea for his current courses (and similar courses he taught previously) was to create something “resolutely” futures oriented. And the university administration wants to promote the history major as one that instills workforce-ready skills, says Hochfelder.

And personally, he said, he’s never believed in “studying the past for the past’s own sake.”

“I guess that makes me presentist, and I’m OK with that,” Hochfelder said, noting he’s regularly criticized short-term thinking in society in general. “The major rationale for studying history is to figure out what happened. To answer that question, if we have that mind-set, the very next question is, ‘So where are we going?’”

All panelists said that asking students to think about how the past will shape the future was a valuable exercise relevant to their students. But the exercise can be decidedly psychological, said Joe Sears, a high school teacher at private Emory/Weiner School, in Houston.

“My students are very pessimistic about the future -- I don’t know if that’s a product of *The Hunger Games*,” he said, to audience laughter. (What followed was several minutes of humorous audience comments.) “The future tend to feature dystopia, or at least major U.S. cities -- Los Angeles in particular -- I think that’s a product of the future.”

Bishop agreed, saying he thought pessimism about the global future was also attributable to the 21st-century’s rapid traveling fast over the Internet and a general media overload. Yet he also noted what he called a “disconnect” between students’ feelings about the global future -- generally gloomy -- and their own personal future, which they see as bright.

Beyond helping prepare students for the future, talking about it can give students a sense of empowerment and otherwise develop. All panelists stressed that the idea behind teaching the future isn’t to promote a specific topic. Rather, they said, any teaching about the future is a step in the right direction.

Those in the audience included an environmental historian focused on climate change and a professor at a private University who asked whether the military might be too concerned with the future of technology. The panelists replied that people in general are, probably due to the fact that it’s tangible and relevant. Bishop warned them that beginning to teach the future likely means encountering skepticism from the audience.

He traced that skepticism back to the ancient world, in which futures were divined in ways that were often wildly different from what he proposes.

“Frankly, I don’t think we’ve let that go,” Bishop said. But the Greeks didn’t get it all wrong, he said. “They didn’t simply mean history, but rather, learning or knowing by inquiry.”



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