Future Visions

Finding Utopia and Intuition: Imagining and Understanding Visions For a Better World

> *"We dismiss the mistakes (of kids) as cute, the accidents of ignorance; but they are at the heart of the intellectually curious mind."*
>
> --Deborah Meier, journal entry from *The Power of Their Ideas*

Unit Overview

In Future Visions, students are invited to dream and have fantastical visions. Their visions become a basis for study, and are channeled into intellectual currency—meaningful information that can bear on world problems. The entire process bears similarities to the "Theory of U" by C. Otto Scharmer in that students journey from familiar territory, suspend conventional practicality and preconceptions, dream and envision, and bring their insights to bear on real world issues and action.

The unit begins with Silent Squares (see "Silent Squares Teacher Notes") to establish the spirit of inquiry, discovery, systems principles and holistic big picture thinking. Students then explore the psychology of their own truth making process through discussion of the story "Cherokee Wisdom." After a brief introduction to the history and meaning of Sir Thomas More's Utopia, students engage in "Utopia Brainstorm," in which they are encouraged to dream and design their own Utopia. They are asked to suspend all judgment of ideas and consideration of practicality at this stage. All ideas are valid, no matter how crazy or wild they may seem, regarding ideal schools, government, culture, money, work, etc.

Students then construct a product that communicates their Utopia for presentation at Utopia Convention in the form of a mural, skit, story, speech, PowerPoint, or other medium of their choosing. Prior to convention students are introduced to intuition as "knowledge before thought," and learn that in dreaming and imagining their Utopias they have "captured their intuition" from their dreams. The scientific study of dream analysis is discussed for how it can reveal truths about our thinking and creativity.

In the convention process, each group leads a discussion on their Utopia using the norms of Socratic Seminar, and students learn that they are practicing "philosophy" (love of wisdom). Solution focused problem solving is introduced as a way to analyze their Utopias and problem-solution-problem feedback is discovered and applied. In this process Utopian ideas are viewed as solutions to problems, which create other problems that in turn need to be solved, and discussion moves to the practical realm by considering these problems and the creative ways that society has and is addressing them in the real world. The unit closes with students gaining the official title of "Junior Philosopher" and having

generated a set of real world topics and issues for continued research and learning beyond the Future Visions unit.

Topics
- Intuition and dreams
- Solution focused problem solving
- Problem-solution-problem feedback loops
- Socratic seminar
- Creativity and imagination
- The practice of philosophy
- Dreams and psychology

Big Ideas
- The solution to a problem can be found by observing a similar system where the problem does not exist to learn how to avoid the problem in the first place.
- Solutions to problems usually create other problems that need to be solved, and solutions to these problems create other problems, and so on, creating a feedback loop. Viewing the whole system in problem solving helps to avoid this.
- Intuition is a type of knowledge that comes from your heart and your mind when you're not thinking. It is a source of truth and creativity, and it can be strengthened and developed through various methods.
- People can gain high knowledge from just talking in a thoughtful way with others in a group, without using books, computers or outside sources of information.
- Imagination and dreams often contain high wisdom that can be used to teach us about ourselves, create great art, inventions, and solutions to problems of all kinds.
- High creativity happens when we are able to temporarily let go of goals, expectations, practicality, and judgments of right and wrong.

Objectives

Activity/Strategic
- Enrichment classes
- To generate topics for interest-based student research projects
- To create contexts for subject area study

Student learning
Students will gain:
- An introductory understanding of the big ideas above.
- An introductory understanding of intuition, the meaning and practice of philosophy, solution focused problem solving, Socratic Seminar, and Utopia.
- Enhanced belief in the wisdom of their own imagination
- Understanding that creative exercise is rigorous learning
- Knowledge of cutting edge technologies and ideas that emerge from discussion and analysis

Preparation: Prerequisites and Materials
- Materials for various Utopia projects (skits, videos, PowerPoints, murals, songs, etc.)—computers, computer display, poster paper, crayons, model making materials, video camera, etc. (Note: Future Visions can be conducted without any of these materials, by omitting the product creation and have students conduct convention directly from their brainstorm lists.)
- "Self Reflection" handout and/or prompts.
- "Cherokee Wisdom" handout and discussion prompts
- Optional prerequisite: Silent Squares

Activity Script

Special note: Be sure to read the teacher journal at the end of this document. Future Visions requires an extraordinary amount of improvisation from the teacher. Its strength lies in the students' generation of the ideas and learning which requires the teacher to be quick to capitalize on important ideas, process them on the spot, and direct the inquiry into the most fruitful areas. The teacher journal can provide a sense of what is possible in Future Visions, the kind of learning that takes place, and how it might be facilitated.

Step 1: Silent Squares (optional but recommended)

Refer to the teacher notes for silent squares and conduct that activity with the debriefing. This is not essential but can be very helpful to establish norms and systems concepts.

Step 2: Thought, Choices, and Reality—Cherokee Wisdom Story (optional)

Read the story Cherokee Wisdom to students and discuss using the prompts. This activity can be useful to get students' minds open to think in new ways and consider how reality is created by what we believe it to be. This can be useful in creating readiness for students to make connections between their fantasy dreams and real problems in the Utopia Convention.

Step 3: Future Visions Introduction—Self Reflection and the Human Drive to Improve the World
Use prompts from the "Self Reflection" handout to have a discussion and establish a baseline for inquiry—that the world is not perfect, and historically, human beings generally have worked hard to create a better world.

Have students write answers and hold a discussion, or just write a few prompts on the board. Key prompts to focus on might be:
1. What do you see going on in the world that does not make sense?
2. What goes on in school that does not make sense?
3. What do you care about the most?
4. What is a "good life?"

Come to the conclusion with the students that:
"There are ways we can improve the world today. All through history human beings have worked to improve the world, solve hunger, improve the environment, reduce hatred, reduce war, and create a more ideal society."

Step 4: Introduce Utopia

Share with students:
"We know that people have always wanted to make a better world. After all, this is only natural. Several hundred years ago there was a man named Thomas More who wrote a book called Utopia. He started a discussion about what would be a "perfect" world, or actually what would be a more "ideal society" from what they had then. People actually differ on what this might be. Not everyone has the same idea of what a better world would be. We can tell this just by asking each other in the class! But people don't disagree that much on the basics, just sometimes on how to get there. After all, everyone wants to be healthy, to have fun, have enough to eat, and lots of other things, the list goes on. So eventually the title of Thomas More's book became a word to mean "an ideal society," or what some people might call a "paradise," or a "perfect world.""

"So now it's your turn. In Future Visions we are going to become philosophers, and much more. We'll talk about that a bit later, but for now, philosophers study ideas, how to live, and they ask big questions about what's important and what the meaning of things are. In a way, you were being a philosopher when did your self-reflection. Now you're really going to get into it. You are going to create a Utopian world. This creation will start with your imagination, but you will be surprised where it ends up. You will get a choice for how to share your world for Utopia Convention--you can make a model, a mural, a PowerPoint, a skit or TV commercial, a speech, or a story. Then you will take your Utopia to Utopia Convention where we will share. We'll talk more about that at convention."

Step 5. Utopia Brainstorm—Time to let go and take off….
Time duration: 15-30 minutes

This first step has students in groups brainstorming ideas for a Utopian society.

1. Assemble students in groups by any method or criteria you choose.
2. Students should be seated facing each other, each student must have a sheet of note paper and pencil to record their own list of ideas that come up in the brainstorm.
 3. Each student group compiles a list of as many ideas they can think of that would be in a Utopia for them. This list will provide the raw material and basis for the Utopia project they will bring to the convention. It's just the first step with some very important guidelines. **Brainstorm process guidelines:**

- What kind of a world would you like to live in? Let yourself dream and imagine the unimaginable—go wild!

- To get the ball rolling, you might start using categories: schools, money, government/laws, technology, entertainment, etc.
- Each member must write down EVERY idea that comes up by all members on their own sheet.
- No idea is to be judged at this stage. That is the purpose of a brainstorm. You will think about them later. Right now, don't think too much, point is to capture all the ideas that come up. WRITE DOWN EVERY IDEA THAT IS SPOKEN!
- Don't argue about the ideas or consider how practical they are.

4. Typical ideas at this stage might include: free money, money that grows on trees, purple flying quacking cows, edible rocks, hover cars, peace villages, clothing that makes you invisible, water works as gas, no school, everything is free, learning helmets, and more. (See the Teacher Journal for more examples of what to expect).

5. At the end of class the brainstorm groups can share one or two ideas from their list to provide closure. Don't let them go on beyond a minute or so at this point. There will be much to come in the convention.

Step 6: Work Sessions--Creating the Utopia Project
Time duration: 1-3, 45-minute class sessions

1. Students revisit their list and make some judgments about the ideas. They will choose which Utopia ideas on their list to include in their Utopia project.

2. Project choices: model, skit, TV commercial, PowerPoint, mural, speech, story, mixed media (PowerPoint background and murals for skit, etc.)

- Teaching Point: the Utopia Project is not the focus of the unit, nor is it the culminating event. Students are conditioned to place great importance on the completeness and quality of craftsmanship in these projects, but depending how your structure a grade for this, you will want to deemphasize perfection here and save as much time as possible for the convention where the bulk of the learning occurs.

- Discussion Point: Explain to students that the process they are going through is the same for how many great discoveries and inventions have been created in the past. The idea is that sometimes you have to let yourself work and imagine without judging how useful everything is. When you judge every idea the moment it happens, you might throw away some really great ideas accidentally. You have to get away from the ideas and then come back to them later to see if they are any good. This happens to artists and musicians a lot, and even for scientists. A great scientist, Richard Feynman, once shared how he got the ideas for one his greatest discoveries when he did things "only for the fun of it."

This step is fun for all kids at all levels and helps to draw in students who are less comfortable with discussion, creativity, and thinking activities.

Step 6: Utopia Convention

The convening of Utopia Convention should be heralded as a major event in class. At last, all the utopian creators will gather and share their visions. The world will be much better for it all…

1. Introduction: Norms

Explain to students:

Convention is not like doing presentations. You will be sharing your Utopia Project with the group and your Utopia will provide an opportunity to learn and have a discussion. It is in this discussion that the real learning happens. Your projects aren't what are important here—it's your IDEAS that are important. The project is just being used to help us understand your IDEAS.

We will be doing our convention as a Socratic Seminar. That's just a fancy word for a thoughtful discussion actually. It was named after a very famous man, a philosopher, Socrates. Does anyone know what a philosopher is? A philosopher is someone who does philosophy. What is philosophy?

<<various answers, depending on grade level>>

Well guess what, all of you are about to become philosophers. Philosophy is the study of ideas. The word has two parts, philo (meaning love) and sophy (meaning wisdom), so philosophy actually means "love of wisdom." And wisdom is a type of intelligence that is deep intelligence and knowledge that you can get from experience, and yes, a lot of Socratic Seminars!

You might not believe it, but in the day of Socrates, the most fun thing to do was to hang out and talk about ideas, and talk some more. Many people believe you can learn more that way than by reading books, going on the computer, or watching TV (for sure…). Really, this method of learning is called "dialectic" and it can be very powerful. When we do Socratic Seminar there are some guidelines. (Write these on the board):
   1. Listen deeply
   2. Don't talk when others are talking
   3. Stay on topic
   4. Don't stay confused, ask if you don't understand something
   5. Discuss ideas, not opinions

2. Convention process

Each group will have up to 30 minutes for their Utopia sharing at convention. Each sharing follows the following process:

A. Introductory presentation (15 minutes)
(This segment is run entirely by students. You should only engage if they get track or disruptive)
        -The team presents their project and explains the content of their Utopia.
        -Audience asks clarifying questions about the Utopia

B. Analysis and Connection to the Real World
(Teacher runs this segment)

Explain to student s that at this point you are going to analyze the Utopia. Explain that to analyze means to break something down into parts to find out how it works.

- ▪ Teaching Point: The analysis is based on an adaptation of solution focused problem solving. Solution focused problem solving emphasizes finding circumstances where a problem does not exist, and applying that information to the problem at hand. This leads to a problem-solution-problem feedback cycle between #3 and #4, where problems created by solutions to problems created are explored.

Choose one feature of the Utopia and run through the analysis questions with the entire class, placing responses on the board under the headings. (Refer to the solution-focused problem-solving template). The strategy with this line of questioning is to identify the problem the utopia feature is solving, and then **slowly shift the discussion from the Utopia feature (which is in the fantasy-intuition realm) to the PROBLEM that the Utopia feature was inspired by (reality).** The Utopia feature actually becomes discarded half way through the analysis as you become more focused on the problem that the Utopia feature inspired and illuminated, and start focusing on the real world issue. The discussion moves from fantasy/intuition to reality/action.   Note: Students will resist this---they will want to stay in the fantasy realm. This is your challenge as a teacher, to keep the line of discussion moving through the analysis sequence.

*Fantasy—Utopia feature:*_____
  1. What problem are you solving by having _____in your Utopia?
  2. What problem are you creating as a result of this?
  3. What alternate solutions besides your Utopia feature might be more realistic or create fewer problems?
  4. What problems are you creating by your alternate solutions?
  5. Where in the real world is this NOT a problem?
  6. What is happening in the real world today with regard to this problem?

Reality
For this last question you should add any knowledge you have regarding the topic at hand. The general purpose of this questioning is to bring them away from their fantasy visions and discover how their imaginative ideas contain seeds of wisdom and intuition about the real world. Note that some features will challenge you. For example, "chocolate rivers" may come up. In this case, a

Sample Analysis
The following is derived from actual student responses.
Utopia feature: no school
(This feature will usually come up with students. Outside the context of Future Visions such a comment is often dismissed by adults as irresponsible, rebellious, naïve, and counterproductive.)

1. What problem are you solving by having no school?
   Lack of sleep, not enough time with family, family problems, lack of time to do fun stuff and to play outside, not enough exercise, unhappiness, stress,
2. What problem are you creating as a result of eliminating school?
   People won't be smart, they won't know anything, they won't be able to get jobs, crime will go up, our country won't be as strong,
3. What alternate solutions besides eliminating school might be more realistic or create fewer problems?
   Make school more fun, shorter school day, have school at home, have outdoor classrooms, get rid of standardized tests, learn things we care about
4. What problems are you creating by your alternate solutions?
   Shorter school day has child care issues, most parents can't home school, without tests we won't know if learning is happening, if we only learn what we care about, we may not learn what we need to know
5. What kinds of situations in the world are there where schools DON'T create the problems we identified?
   Some home schools, some independent and charter schools, schools with progressive curricula and outdoor programs, flexible schedules, and no standardized testing
6. What is happening in the real world today with regard to this problem?
   There are many types of schools in America that do schooling differently. Many of them don't have these problems. This issue is a top issue in our nation, from the most powerful leaders to the smartest scientists and professors in universities. Charter schools and school vouchers have been created to address some of these issues, and home school is growing rapidly. Many public schools like yours are working to solve the problems your identified in your Utopia. Your intuition is right on.

Assessment

The final "Sharing and Reflection" letter to parents can be used in class only or to send home to parents. It serves a variety of purposes:

- It authenticates the student's voice in their own learning. It is specifically not called an "evaluation" or "assessment," so students experience the process of mature independent learning, honest self reflection, and break the habit of "doing things for the teacher" vs. relying on their own judgment.
- It informs parents about the content/activities that their child was engaged in the unit.
- It opens parent/child conversation about learning, as a letter addressed to the parent. The parent is urged to ask their child about the letter, to engage further reflection.
- It provides an assessment for adults to evaluate students' thinking and engagement in the ideas of the unit.

Appendix—Teacher Journal: Future Visions

10/3/06

Wow, a real ecocity. Students presented a model of a city where there were more sidewalks and a gigantic tree in the center of the city that everyone was responsible for caring for. There were fewer roads, so people spend more time walking than driving. The buildings look small but on the inside they are rather large, the design is to save energy. A food store has all organic food that is actually cheaper than junk food, and junk food is real expensive. Animals are living on Animal Island, separate from the city, and you can get there though a special portal.

We discussed how their design was much like an ecocity, or co-housing concepts where people live in more communal environments and establish more supportive relationships, both for logistics, emotionally and spiritually. In the real world, architects and planners point out that the carrying capacity of the earth can be greatly increased with a higher standard of living if sprawl is eliminated and populations are more densely located in cities, where less driving is required for services etc. This utopia picked that up. It is an exact model of what these visionaries are suggesting.

10/2/02

Today the first student group shared their utopian model. The protocol for sharing was discussed as being a Utopia Convention. This entailed an introductory definition of psychology, philosophy, Socratic seminar, and a review of intuition. We affirmed that the utopian visions are in fact dreams, and that psychologists use dreams to gain deeper insights into the personality and motives of the dreamer. In this way our utopias can inform us about ourselves on many levels. Philosophy (philo==love, sophy=wisdom) was discussed as the practice of Socrates (that Greek guy that loved to hang out and share ideas . . .), and Socratic Seminar as a fancy name for a well-reasoned and disciplined discussion. We can gain "knowledge" by discussing ideas in a rigorous way. This was set out to be our goal following utopian sharing.

The utopia presented featured no school, everything is free, children can drive to give adults more time, movie theaters for kids only, among other items. The following discussion began reasoning through practical issues: ripple affect problems created by such a society. The conversation brought us to many topics including the morality/practicality/responsibility of welfare, political philosophy (how could a society/government run if everything was "free? "), production of resources, economy, methods of learning, and how the U.S. was created by a bunch of philosophers trying to create their own utopia, borrowing the best from many utopian visions before them. All agreed that in spite of some impractical aspects of the utopia, that it revealed some very real concerns and observations of students, rich for further study and refinement. Conclusions: Utopia will inevitably involve compromise, and even if a solution appears impractical, there is often a part of it we can use for a more practical solution. Some students have been making lists of ripple affects of their utopian solutions and alternatives. The conversations will continue with 5 more utopias and students will write

a reflection on a choice of topics: personal values/priorities, topics for further study, a refined utopia, examples and counter examples that support some ideas presented in the Convention, and personal action plan to address a single utopian idea.

10/10

As students share their utopian visions I am gently leading them through the analysis stage in varying degrees--to consider problems solved, ripple effects, and alternatives that relate to reality. Sometimes students are reluctant to let go of the fantasy stage of the project. They have clearly had a great time imagining. Often in these cases I take the opportunity to point out some deeper wisdom contained in their imaginative ideas. For example, the student who has a world where everything runs on water spawned a mini lesson on the new cutting edge research into fuel cell technology. Fuel cells, expected to someday provide power for electric cars, utilize Hydrogen to generate electricity. One likely source of hydrogen will be seawater--hence, a world that runs on water! Coincidence? In this case yes, but other students have developed conservation oriented solutions to energy problems and hunger as opposed to a supply side approach (e.g. drilling, currently a large debate in our nation. In this way students' are empowered by their ideas.

Also, the process of analyzing their utopian visions, or dreams, has been likened to formal dream analysis and the field of psychology. New to most students, the ideas of these fields of study are fascinating to them. Our unit in some ways has authentically engaged them in those processes. They are also informed that they have become "philosophers " in this project. The definition of philosophy is attached after the meaning is experienced--when asked what philosophy is, the answer is "what you have been doing for past 5 days--asking and debating large life questions. "

10/31

The next cycle of Future Visions has begun. I have recently been struck by some feedback from students who were involved in utopian creations last year, and are approaching this for the second time. Far from having the attitude of "we've already done that," they are eager to build on what they learned last year. The degree to which they have retained last year's experience and continued to process it over the whole year is very exciting. It is exemplary of an important learning principle—that the depth of what is learned in any classroom experience cannot be fully assessed immediately, that there is a great deal of "seed planting" involved, especially in enrichment curricula. Like in small adjustments to the attitude of a ship's course at sea, the significant manifestation of that change of attitude (compass heading) does not occur until much later in the journey. Students often do not fully process what is learned until years later. Indeed, this is the essence of teaching habits of mind. Factoids evaporate over time. Ideas, habits and experiences grow. I was almost shocked at the extent that many

of the students not only vividly remembered the utopian experiences of last year, but had developed a far greater sophistication and clarity of those visions, e.g. insight into the fallacy of "perfection," and that "ideal" existence means accepting and incorporating the duality of life, good/evil, pain/pleasure, etc. A theme has been acceptance of what we cannot change, and that utopia can largely be, in a real sense, a choice in our state of mind.

11/14/02

Today we began seminars with the cycle 2 classes of Future Visions. Many utopias have the automatic feature of "no school." On one level this is natural and superficial, but as a point of discussion it can become very significant. As we probed the problems that no school solves, we discovered that kids don't have enough time to be themselves, and spend time with their families. "No school " solved this, however we looked at ripple affects—problems created by this and of course many agreed that kids do need to learn, so the "no school" immediately was revised to mean "home school." Students discussed this quite a bit, exploring the merits of home school. Most did not even know such a thing existed. I informed them that home schooling in the U.S. is on the rise, at a rate never seen in modern times before, and for many of the same reasons they cited in the creation of their utopias. What started as a knee jerk, wacky idea was revealed to be a reaction to, and pointing in the direction of, a very real modern phenomenon. Their fantasy was really the wisdom of their intuition dressed up in disguise.

Another event warmed my heart. A student asked if he could paint the sky two different colors, asking my "permission. " I replied, "Of course, you can do whatever you want here—it's YOUR creation and imagination. But why do you want to do that? "
He responded, "if the sky were two different colors more people would notice it, and be entertained by it." He said, "People should look to nature for entertainment as opposed to TV and buying tickets to rock concerts, etc. They should look to nature for entertainment instead of just spending money on a bunch of stuff. . . "
That kind of thinking on the part of 4th graders would warm any teacher's heart. It gave new weight and consideration to the next students' idea that kids should run the world . . .
All students realized why kids of course are not ready to run the world, but they have a great deal to offer adults in the way of insight and pure wisdom. Our discussion ended with an agreement on how important it is for people to sustain the objectivity, creativity, imagination, and pure insight of children into adult life.

11/22
Today the topic of "no taxes " or "lower taxes " came up in students' utopias. We discussed the dilemma involved, what taxes were for, and what the adult world is struggling with in this topic . . .
In the next utopia the idea of giving to the poor emerged as very important for an ideal

society to avert crime and ultimately, war (student's ideas). Students here were at the ground level of a big political issue of our time--welfare reform and tax reform. One student had heard of "welfare " as a government program, and I explained the meaning. The connection was quickly made regarding the interdependence of their utopian ideas (just like silent squares!)—no taxes and giving to the poor. How could such a paradox be solved? Students left the topic realizing what needed to be researched, and that their fantasy dream had unearthed VERY important topics that the adult world is currently sorting out. Students' dream, play, wondering and intuition was right on the target-- they discovered the power and significance of their intuitive, and often simplistic, ideas.