

# The future of tourism: interview with Peter Bishop about teaching the future

Albert Postma and Peter C. Bishop

## Abstract

**Purpose** – As the *Journal of Tourism Futures* celebrates its tenth anniversary, Dr Albert Postma interviews Dr Peter Bishop, an expert on teaching the future. The interview was held on July 25, 2024.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A personal interview.

**Findings** – The interview provides insights into the importance of teaching the future, the evolution in teaching the future, competencies and skills that the teaching focuses on, challenges of teaching the future in the current era and the role of AI.

**Originality/value** – Bishop shares his expertise on the development of teaching the future, its key features and its challenges in the current era.

**Keywords** Teaching the future, Futures education, Futures thinking, Futures literacy, Futures competencies

**Paper type** Viewpoint

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## Peter Bishop

My name is Peter Bishop. I have been teaching futures since 1983. It has been a wonderful career that started at the University of Houston-Clear Lake and moved to the University of Houston in 2005.

## Albert Postma

Could you describe how your career evolved?

## Peter Bishop

I call myself “the accidental futurist.” I arrived in 1976 at the University of Houston at its Clear Lake Branch, a brand-new university, to teach statistics and research methods to behavioral science students. My interest was not the future at that time; it was social change. I took my degree in sociology to study social change because I came out of college in the late 1960s at an unusually turbulent time. What was going on in the street and on the campus seemed a lot more interesting than what was going on in physics lab.

The University of Houston-Clear Lake had already developed a futures degree, the first degree in the world called “Studies of the Future,” created by the Dean of the School of Human Sciences and Humanities. I got involved with the futurists there – Chris Dede and Jib Fowles, the two faculty members that the university hired to begin the Futures program in 1975. I learned about Futures Studies from them and others. In the process, I said, “I don’t know much about forecasting, but I think I might be able to figure it out. Can I teach one of the courses?” And they said, “Sure. By the way, why don’t you just run the program while you’re at it?”

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This paper forms part of a special section “10th Anniversary of the *Journal of Tourism Futures*”, guest edited by Dr Stefan Hartman, Prof. Albert Postma and Prof. Ian Yeoman.

I was perfectly happy to do that. The first thing was to organize the curriculum. Up to that time, graduation was pretty much up to each faculty member. Some faculty members required some courses, and others other courses. I said, "We all need to require the same courses to graduate, and these are the six I'm recommending plus two electives and a Master's Thesis, Project or Internship." They agreed and that led to what we now call Framework Foresight, the name of the Houston approach to professional futures. We started teaching that in the 1980s, and it is still going strong under the direction of [Hines and Bishop \(2015\)](#).

### Albert Postma

A few years ago I ordered the book "Thinking about the future," authored by both of you. It contains so much valuable information and is very helpful in my work.

### Peter Bishop

Yep. It is related to the curriculum that we worked on over the last 30 years. The book "Thinking about the Future" is really a set of tips and techniques for practicing foresight. "Teaching about the Future" is the curriculum.

### Albert Postma

How important is teaching in the field of futures thinking, for young people, for professionals?

### Peter Bishop

There are two answers to that question for each of two audiences.

The University began the program for graduate students wanting to start careers in the field. The 1970s was full of change, and indeed the future with Alvin Toffler, Donella Meadows, *The Population Bomb*, the oil crisis, you name it. The World Futures Society and the World Future Studies Federation were created during that time. So the future was on everyone's mind.

I took over the program in 1983. Our mission was and continues to be: prepare students for careers as professional futurists. But the program almost went away at the time because the early 80s suffered from, what I might call *change fatigue*, at least in the USA. "Haven't we had enough of these crises? Can't we calm down and live our lives without so much change?" The political establishment at that time, led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, was only too happy to quiet everything down. "We could just go about our business (and it was business), and let the marketplace decide." Attention to the future declined and future studies along with it. The University had single digit enrollment in that decade.

Then, the Soviet Union collapsed and the Internet popped up. People around the world, businesses and government agencies included, said, "Wow, this change stuff is a little bit more complicated than we thought. We can't just sit back and let it happen." Our enrollment went up in the 1990s, and it has been strong ever since. We founded the Association of Professional Futurists in 2002. So, it is important that we have populated the world with professional futurists who are helping individuals and organizations anticipate and influence an uncertain and dynamic future.

I retired from the University in 2013, and I changed my audience from graduate students to young people in secondary schools and colleges. The focus is no longer professional practice, but futures literacy, a term we have adopted from [Miller \(2006, 2018\)](#), although his use of the term is different from ours. In our terminology futures literacy is the ability to understand, anticipate, and influence the Future." One does not have to be foresight professional and do traditional scanning, scenario development and strategic plans to be futures literate. Rather it is a set of habits, knowledge and skills that we believe everyone should have. Financial literacy is an analog. You do not have to be an accountant or a financial expert to balance your check book or know that you should save for

education or retirement. Financial literacy is the ability to manage money; futures literacy is the ability to manage change.

### **Albert Postma**

Do you encounter specific difficulties with teaching the future to young people? They may not be aware of developments in the world around or affecting the future. How do you deal with that?

### **Peter Bishop**

The difficulty is not with the young people. When we finally get to them, which is rare unfortunately, they really like the subject. They like to learn and talk about change and the future. They are heading into a world of uncertainty and challenge which produces anxiety for some, and they want to talk about it. They want to ask, "What is my life going to be like? How am I going to make a life?" Once engaged, they are eager to learn about the future and learn the skills to anticipate and influence their future.

The difficulty is with the teachers, professionals for whom I have the highest respect and who are doing a tough job every day. But they were never introduced to the future in their education or teacher training, so they do not know how to teach it. The GEN Koleji school in Istanbul is teaching futures literacy in the 5th, 6th, 9th and 10th grades every year. We asked the students what they thought of the course. They loved it. They liked talking about important things. We also asked the teachers. The teachers did not like it very much. They said they did not believe they were doing their job.

We pinpointed the problem. They could not answer the question, "What do you think is going to happen?" They can answer that question in every other subject: in history, in science, in math and even in literature. And their job depends on being able to answer students' questions. But they felt bad because they could not answer the question about the future. They felt that they were not doing their job.

I made a mistake in training those teachers. I did not tell them that they could not answer that question the usual way. In other words, you cannot teach futures literacy like other subjects. There are no facts, no ready answers to their questions. What I should have said is, "You say I don't know the answer to that question. So let's figure it out together." And all of a sudden they have shifted from the world of lecturing on content, on textbook material, teaching facts and to the world of skills, especially the skills of futures literacy. Once they got that, they were delighted with the futures classes.

### **Albert Postma**

What are the key competencies and skills that you focus on if you teach the future?

### **Peter Bishop**

Futures literacy is a combination of skills.

The first thing is to be aware of change. Scanning is what we do as professionals. In this case, it is just to be in touch with what is happening, what the trends are and where they are headed. We hear a lot of that in the media. It is not the future, not the only future, but it is a good place to start to understand all the futures.

Then we ask the "what if" question. In professional terms, we challenge the assumptions of the expected future. The expected future assumes that things continue as they have, and most probably will, but we also know that something else could happen instead. "What else could plausibly occur to create a different future?" Those are the alternative futures and the scenarios.

The third competence is to identify our values as the basis of our preferred future, the future we want to happen. In the *Futures Thinking Playbook* ([Teach the Future, n.d.](#)), we ask, “What will you stand up for?” What will you work for to achieve more of your preferred future for yourself, your family, community and the world in general.

To put it simply, the three core competencies are:

- (1) Recognizing change, identifying trends and articulating the expected future.
- (2) Challenging those trends with what could happen instead, leading to alternative futures.
- (3) Identifying and working for a preferred future.

There are others, of course.

### Albert Postma

In class, do you work with a joint effort, or do students work individually?

### Peter Bishop

Because the answer is, “I don’t know what will happen, so let’s figure it out together,” it needs a different form of teaching. We should be teaching skills, not just facts. Indeed in all subjects, not just futures studies. Unfortunately, skills are not the primary purpose in most traditional classrooms. It is usually the learning and the restatement of facts. The students do learn skills in school, but it is outside the classroom. They are learning them on the football pitch, in the theater program and in the band, and in clubs and student council. Skills like futures literacy should be part of the academic curriculum, not just the extracurriculars.

### Albert Postma

In this context, how do you deal with the changing view on the media among this generation? Do these young people still believe that the media and the news contain facts, or do they believe not everything is true?

### Peter Bishop

They are very much involved in media, but the media is not always the most accurate version of what is happening in the world or the future. We are in the process of releasing a series of ten short videos that cover some of the main points of futures literacy ([Teach the Future, n.d.](#)), one of which is titled optimism/pessimism. It is about understanding what our feelings are about the future, not just about what might happen, but how we feel about it. Are you hopeful or not? I share well-known research that the media is not a public service. It is not there to inform us in an unbiased way. Although there many good journalists dedicated to telling the truth as they know it, the primary purpose of the owners is to make money. We know from cognitive science that people pay more attention to negative and sensational stories. So the media distorts the “news” to the negative and sensational content so more people will watch and advertisers will have potential customers. Knowing that is called media literacy: how do you live in a world of all of this media? Those are the kinds of things that we should be talking to young people about.

We have done the videos, but we have not tested them with students yet. But I am hopeful that when they know that they are looking through a lens which is distorted some extent, that they will understand that change and the future is not as negative or as sensational as the media portrays it. There are real challenges ahead, no doubt, but media emphasizes the negative, not because people are doing anything wrong. They are simply acting as good capitalists and making money. And yes, we also have an environment, unfortunately, and I wish it were not so, in which people can

literally make things up. They probably did it before, but it was much more subtle and now it is blatant. And so we do have to teach media literacy.

### Albert Postma

I do not know if you include the creation of scenarios itself in your teaching, but what role do you see for AI here?

### Peter Bishop

To use [Dator's \(1994\)](#) terms AI is a "tsunami of change." The Internet was such a tsunami. Computers in general, the personal computer, and the smart phone were tsunamis, as were fossil fuels and electricity. We have been in this position many times before.

AI has tremendous potential to change education and society in general. But there have been other technologies with the same potentials that do not happen. Nuclear energy was the tsunami of change in the 1950s. It kind of went away and then came back a little. And then went away again and came back a little and went away again. And so just because we *think* it's going to be – that's the Expected future-we should ask: Are there ways in which it does not become the future?

So, I think it is going to be very important in our world. I really want to figure it out. We probably cannot stop it, so we will have to live with it and use it as best we can.

I have to tell you that one of the most unusual experiences I have lately is having a conversation with the machine. I have had two or three of those, and it feels odd. I mean, I learned all my math facts in school, and then I got a spreadsheet and I did not have to do math facts anymore. That felt a little odd too, but it was wonderful. And this I think will be equally as wonderful as long as we realize what it is and what it is not. And that is the discernment that we must use to and help the world understand: Yes, be ready for it, but it is not everything that the media or that fiction has portrayed it to be.

### Albert Postma

Now I want to ask you an entirely different question.

First of all, I noticed that since we started with our institute to provide training and courses, the provision of courses, at least in the Netherlands, has increased considerably. This made me think of the idea of era analysis that you taught me about in your Houston course and that I sometimes also use in our projects. Do you recognize such eras in "teaching the future?"

### Peter Bishop

In fact, I appreciate your bringing that up because, as you remember, I use an era model borrowed from biological evolution called punctuated equilibrium. Trends go on for a while; then disruptions occur resulting in new eras, which go on for a while until they do not. Over and over again.

I do not know if you are familiar with Jennifer Gidley and David Hicks, prominent foresight educators. They introduced the idea of foresight education in the 1980s. Before, Alvin Toffler wrote *Learning for Tomorrow* in the 1970s ([Toffler, 1974](#)), and H. G. Wells called for professors of foresight in the 1930s. We have had the idea for a long time.

I would say, however, that today we are still at the earliest phase of the learning curve. I am an educator. Education as a system, however, believes that its mission is to transmit not to create. We are deep into a scientific culture where facts outweigh ideas, where logic is more important than imagination, where science is the only way to know something. And the schools are part of that culture, I almost say trapped in that culture so that only empirical facts and theories are allowed in the classroom. The future does not exist there because there are no facts or verifiable theories about the

future. There is nothing there to prepare for an uncertain future. They think that if students know everything that has happened before, they will be ready for the future. But they are making the assumption that the future will be like the past. It will be to some extent, and certainly we should know the traditions and have that knowledge to some extent, but how do we deal with novelty and change?

I believe that many teachers would be delighted to teach about the future as we have for more than 50 years now. But they do not believe they have the agency to do so because of all the institutional barriers and requirements that schools and teachers have. So, it is very, very difficult at this point. Education is not at all prepared and not even paying any attention to the future. I would love foresight education to become a fad, where everybody says, "Foresight education is trending; it must be important; we have to do it." That would be a welcome disruption.

There is a saying in the entertainment industry that it takes 20 years to become an overnight sensation. In futures it may be 40 years or more to become an overnight sensation. I am waiting for that to happen. That would be the beginning of a new era.

We have been thinking about teaching the future for a long time. We now have the means to do so. It began at the graduate level where we developed the approach to practice foresight as a profession. But each profession has value and meaning for the world as a whole beyond its professional practice. So you do not take history class to become a professional historian or math to become a professional mathematician. We should be teaching history and math as skills rather than as facts and formulas that we will never use. It should be historical thinking and mathematical thinking that we can use in life. Foresight is now a recognized profession in the adult world of business, government and civil society. It should be integrated in schools as futures literacy.

Education does change; it does add new material. We now have computer science and biotechnology in the schools, and AI is on the way. Your work with foresight in tourism is rather new. So, when the world comes to the school and says you need to teach this, they do it. And they make money doing it. The world has not demanded futures literacy so they cannot make money doing it, yet. Education is still a business. We think of it as non-profit, and it usually is government or some non-commercial organization, but they still have to pay their bills. So we will be waiting until the world demands it and is prepared to pay for it.

### **Albert Postma**

If a university would like to start up a course in futures thinking, what advice would you give them?

### **Peter Bishop**

Literally my work this summer is to begin to coalesce. We have tons of material and lots of experience talking to people. Mostly, I wish we had lots of experience teaching the material, which unfortunately we don't have because I do not know how to get schools to introduce it, or even to talk about it.

Frankly, I do not know about the Netherlands, but education today in the USA is so stressed that teachers, wonderful though they are, are basically trying to get through the year. So developing new material is just about impossible.

As a result, I am putting together what we are calling curriculum frameworks that I could hand to a teacher or a school and say: "Here's a book, here's a set of learning objectives, here's the Futures Consciousness Scale. You can use one or more of them to introduce futures literacy into your classroom next week. You can adapt it, and we hope you do adapt it, but if you simply follow it, your students will be getting the futures literacy competencies that we're both interested in." So those frameworks will be coming out in fall. They are the start of a new era in foresight education.

For more information, see our website at [www.teachthefuture.org](http://www.teachthefuture.org) and newsletter at [www.teachthefuture.org/newsletter](http://www.teachthefuture.org/newsletter) (Teach the Future, n.d.).

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