Projecting Across Time

A routine for understanding a topic (e.g. ideas, phenomena, problems) across a broad span of time reaching backward into the past, and forward into the future.

Pick a topic (e.g. tourism; computers; global migration patterns).
Then, consider it using the following prompts:

Map what you think or already know. What do you know about the topic?

Reach back in time. How has the topic played out in different forms / contexts / places over the last 10 years? The last 100 years? The last 1000 years?

Reach forward in time. How do you think the topic will play out 10 years into the future? 100 years? 1000 years?

Map how your thinking about the topic has changed. How do you view the topic now?

PURPOSE

What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?
This routine encourages learners to view topics (e.g. ideas, phenomena and problems) from the vantage of a broader timescale, than what they have learned from the media, or experienced in their own lifetime. Often, ideas (e.g. childhood; debt; happiness), phenomena (e.g. the Internet; migration), or problems (e.g. lack of access to clean water; terrorism), can look very different depending on how far back in history or how far forward into the future we look.

For instance, the idea of “childhood” can seem relatively unproblematic when learners explore it through their own lived experience, or even by going two or three generations back to how their parents or grandparents experienced it. Imagine inviting them to go even farther back in time, to before the 17th century when “childhood” as an idea did not exist and children worked in the fields from a young age. How would that impact the way learners understand what being a child means? Similarly, inviting learners to project forward in time to understand the idea of “childhood” requires them to consider the conditions that make “childhood” possible or even viable, as well as how what they have come to accept as “childhood” may change dramatically.

LAUNCH

What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

What are some tips for the step "Map what you think or already know?" This step is intended to invite learners to make visible what they think about the topic. A good way to begin the routine is to have learners map this step on a large chart in one color, and then each of the next steps in a different color. That way, at a glance, they can see how their thinking develops with each step.

What are some tips for the step "Reach back in time?" Here, it may be necessary to circumscribe the problem space for your learners: how far back do you want them to go? Is there a particular context(s) you want them to pay attention to? If so, you may want to provide resources that will help them explore the topic, e.g. a carefully curated set of websites, articles, books, etc. Where feasible, this step also offers the opportunity to teach learners about historical understanding and evidence, e.g. how do we know what we know about the past? Whose past is it, and who decides? What evidence has been offered for the conclusions?

What are some tips for the step "Reach forward in time?" This step should encourage a certain amount of imagination and fantasy (especially the farther into the future one reaches for), but not fantastical imaginings that are simply meant to be outrageous. A good follow-up is "What makes you say that?" to prompt learners to provide thoughtful reasons to support their responses. Also, learners may choose to hedge in their response—"Maybe X, maybe Y, depending"—which is perfectly reasonable.

What about some other time frames? It's important that the routine is adapted for your learners, context, and purpose, so if the time frame of 10/100/1000 does not work well (e.g. 10 years is too short for any observable change), feel free to choose other time frames like 20/100/1000 or even 20/200/2000.

This thinking routine was developed as part of the PZ Connect project at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Explore the full PZ Thinking Routine Toolbox at *pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines*.

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