# LOOKING BACK AT LOOKING FORWARD:
## REVIEWING PROGNOSTICATION IN EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY

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As higher education embraces technology, we are beguiled by the bells and whistles that signal reform in the Information Age.  Modern distance education seems just the ticket in the global society, bringing students to virtual classrooms as well as making vast amounts of information available to students in traditional classrooms.   Planning for and implementing distance education are not, however, new as either idea or practice.  And some thoughtful people have left for us pertinent and, often, prescient comments about education.

This Round Table invites participants to examine modern distance education in light of the work of several visionaries whose evaluations of contemporary education and prognostications for a future we now inhabit offer much to illumine the path we are racing down today.   Some of the work to be considered will encourage our activities.  Other selections suggest that we aren't engaged in anything so very new, after all.

Three scholars whose work deserves our attention here are Peter F. Drucker, R. Buckminster Fuller, and William Rainey Harper.  Drucker is still with us, and his ideas about the Knowledge Society and the future of the school are captivating, indeed.  A professional focus on management that informs his positions on education and school has likely contributed to his ideas about the importance of accountability in schools.  It is just this focus, however, that produced the comment that "what will be taught and learned; how it will be taught and learned; who will make use of schooling; and the position of the school in society—all this will change greatly during the ensuing decades.  Indeed, no other institution faces challenges as radical as those that will transform the school." (*Post-Capitalist Society*, p. 209)  In the case of such radical change as Drucker foresees, the power of technology must surely play a part.

More that 40 years before *Post-Capitalist Society*, R. Buckminster Fuller produced a provocative essay published as *Education Automation*, in which he stated that the classroom is not the best place for study because "when an individual is really thinking, he is tremendously isolated." (p. 35)  It would seem, then, that he would have embraced the asynchronous distance education now made possible by technological advances.  He

did anticipate the availability of information through a "two-way TV" and believed that such technology would "bring profound change in education." (p. 43)

In a paper written more than 100 years ago, William Rainey Harper analyzed correspondence education by considering the following questions:
1. What is the correspondence-system of teaching?
2. What disadvantages attend this system, as compared with oral teaching?
3. What advantages, if any, does the correspondence-system have over oral teaching?
4. What results have thus far been accomplished in the line of teaching by correspondence?

This classic essay on teaching by correspondence, which lists eight disadvantages and seven advantages of the correspondence system of education, has much to offer us as we design modern distance education classes. Looking forward from the 1880's, Harper predicted that "the day is coming when the work done by correspondence will be greater in amount than that done in the classrooms of our academies and colleges; when the student who shall recite by correspondence will far outnumber those who will make oral recitations." (*American Ideas about Adult Education: 1710-1951*, p. 83)

These three examples suggest that our current activities in distance education are part of an old and enduring concern. We can, through acknowledgment and examination of such contributions, profit from the efforts of those who still have much to tell us about the future.