



Assumptions about Change

Teach the Future

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Background

This lesson is about assumptions. They are *beliefs* about how we think things are, not facts or proven theories about how they actually are. As a result, assumptions have a bad reputation in our scientifically oriented culture. We are not supposed to make assumptions because they could be wrong. But we are making assumptions all the time. We couldn't live without them. We are making an assumption every time we put our foot on the break, every time we put a check in the mail, every time we get on an airplane. It's true, assumptions can be wrong, but we have to use them and then deal with their uncertainty another way.

Assumptions are particularly important when thinking about the future. One important set of assumptions is the difference between possible and impossible, between plausible and implausible, between likely and unlikely. There is no way of knowing for sure that something is impossible. 'Impossible' things are happening all the time. This document was 'impossible' a 100 years ago. Flying over the Atlantic ocean was 'impossible' 75 years ago. Sending text messages with our telephone was 'impossible' 50 years ago.

What seems impossible today might become routine in the future. So we need to be careful about using assumptions. We may believe that something is impossible, but we also have to be open to the possibility that we are wrong, that impossible becomes the possible, which becomes the plausible and which then becomes the likely. We might want to rule out truly fantastical things, like "Beam me up, Scotty" from *Star Trek*, but some distant civilization might actually figure out how to do that.

So begin this lesson by asking yourself the following questions –

- What is the difference between possible and impossible?
- What is something that is impossible? Barely possible?
- What has always been true about school in your experience? Ever since schools were invented?
- Is it possible that any of those things might change?

Objectives

1. Understand the role of assumptions in our knowledge of the world and its future.
2. Identify some of our assumptions and compare them with other people's assumptions.

Preparation

1. Read "[Raising Awareness of Unconscious Assumptions](#) and Their Influence on the Evaluation of Candidates," the Provost's Office, Boston University. It's about evaluating candidates, but the role of assumptions is the same when evaluating statements about the future.
2. Read "[Strategic Assumptions: The Essential \(and Missing\) Element of your Strategic Plan](#)," Mark Hollingworth, *Ivey Business Journal*, Nov/Dec 2008. A description of the role of assumptions in planning with some great examples of assumptions supporting business plans.
3. Read "[Why The Future of Work Is All About Challenging Convention](#)," Jacob Morgan, *Forbes*, June 2014. A great example of challenging assumptions.
4. Review the [examples](#) of conclusions by the library at the University of Louisville.
 1. What assumption(s) is/are each student making to arrive at his/her conclusion?
 2. What alternative assumptions are there?
 3. What would be the conclusion and the course of action be if the alternative assumption were true rather than the original assumption?