

VUCA

Variability, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity

By Marc Prensky

Published in *Educational Technology*, March-April 2014

Ever heard of “VUCA”? You should have — it’s the world you now live in.

The term comes out of military planning, and has now made its way into business planning as well. It’s time it reached education.

Few readers, educators, or students, I imagine, have heard of it. Yet VUCA is one of the three defining characteristic of our times. (The others, I believe, are accelerating change and a networked world.)

You can Google VUCA (636,000 hits as of Jan 2014). It’s on Wikipedia. “The particular meaning and relevance of VUCA,” the Wikipedia author writes, “often relates to how people view the conditions under which they make decisions, plan forward, manage risks, foster change and solve problems. In general, the premises of VUCA tend to shape an organization's capacity to:

1. Anticipate the Issues that Shape Conditions
2. Understand the Consequences of Issues and Actions
3. Appreciate the Interdependence of Variables
4. Prepare for Alternative Realities and Challenges
5. Interpret and Address Relevant Opportunities”

These are all useful things for educators to get better at. Let’s look at each of the VUCA components in turn:

Variability

There is far more variability in our world than there used to be — half of the most turbulent financial quarters during the past 30 years have occurred since 2002, per The Boston Consulting Group. Bitcoin, a new, technology-based currency, has in a very short

time gone from less than a penny to over \$1000 and much of the way back again. Even the weather is much more variable than it was.

How does this affect education? Think of all the technology choices you have to make — today X is best, tomorrow Y. Today (in the U.S.) it's Common Core but the chances of that being different in a couple of years are enormous. Test scores and rankings go up one year and down the next. Even our students are growing more variable, as our schools become more diverse, and as our kids react to the growing chasm between school and life.

Uncertainty

There are many fewer paths today to reliably get you somewhere in life than there were in the past. It used to be a “given” that more education and higher degrees would assure you a higher income. But so much is now changing that's no longer necessarily the case. As my former part-time assistant (mostly unemployed) put it, “I fell for that.”

In the U.S., owning your home was, for a long while, a sure path to financial security — now there are millions who regret taking that path. Most startups fizzle, but a few go quickly to being worth billions — but even the venture capitalists can't predict which.

And, although some broad outlines are clear, we now know less and less about the details of the world our kids will live in.

Complexity

There are certainly more complex projects in the world — space missions, terraforming brain mapping — but, more importantly, there are a whole lot more people. The world's population *quadrupled* in the last hundred years, from 1.7 billion to 7.1 billion, and is still rising. Even if it levels off, as some predict, there will still be a huge increase in a short time.

More complexity and greater competition go hand-in-hand. Look at the process, in the U.S., of getting, into a good college. It is now a hugely complex undertaking that begins at birth, and involves specialists and hoards of other people. Demographics now play a huge role. I know a kid who, after switching to a fancy private school to get into an Ivy college, made the waiting list at five— only to be rejected by all of them.

Ambiguity

Things are seldom, anymore, only what they seem. We've had to invent new language, such as "frenemy" and "co-petition" to describe the ambiguities that now exist in our world.

Our worst students by some measures are our best by others. There is increasing ambiguity about the role of educators, as technology gets better at doing part of the job. There is growing ambiguity between "teacher" and "student" as kids grow more expert at technology than many of their elders. With all of us taking on multiple new roles, there is ambiguity about which role to play when.

The Potent Combination

Each of these factors — increased variability, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity — is, by itself, disruptive and unsettling. But it is the *concurrence* of the sharp increase in these four VUCA factors that makes this worth paying attention to. It behooves us all to take a moment to ask ourselves how VUCA affects our life and work, as well as the lives and work of our colleagues, our children, and our students.

VUCA, writes the Wikipedia contributor, is a "practical code for awareness and readiness." Now that we all know there *is* a code, we better begin thinking about what it is telling us — and about what we should do as a result.

Marc Prensky—author of the 2001 article Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants—is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, consultant, and game designer in the field of education and learning. He is the author of five books: From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom (Corwin, 2012) Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning (Corwin, 2010), Don't Bother Me, Mom, I'm Learning (Paragon House, 2006), Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw Hill, 2001) and Brain Gain: Technology and the Quest for Digital Wisdom (Palgrave MacMillan 2012). Marc is the founder and CEO of Games2train, a game-based learning company whose clients include IBM, Bank of America, Pfizer, the U.S. Department of Defense and the L.A. and Florida Virtual Schools, and is co-founder of Spree Learning Games, a new "curricular games" company. Marc holds an MBA from Harvard and a Masters in Teaching from Yale. Many of his writings can be found at www.marcprensky.com/writing. Contact Marc at marcprensky@gmail.com.