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## NRTA Live & Learn

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### The Ideal 21st Century School

by Jane Ciabattari



Creative Input: Foundation head Milton Chen, left, and George Lucas preview a story for the Edutopia Web site. Photo: courtesy of GLEF.

Star Wars creator George Lucas is known for fantasy and epic storytelling. When he founded The George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF) in 1991, his impulse was to tell real-life stories about the power of technology to transform education, and to make school more engaging by developing learning tools beyond the textbook. Today, by reporting on the best practices in education in real schoolrooms around the country, the Foundation is distributing models of excellence that others can copy. Project-based learning is its core paradigm for teaching.

"I didn't enjoy school very much," Lucas says of his own educational experiences in Modesto, CA. "Occasionally, I'd have a teacher who would inspire me. But as I got older and began to work with computer technology and telling stories through film, I

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began to wonder, why can't we use these new technologies to improve the educational process?"

**Ahead of Its Time: An Early Flop**

The first Foundation project, in the early 1990s, was a virtual field trip on laserdisc called "Paul Park Ranger and the Mystery of the Disappearing Ducks." In an early example of project-based learning, students took water quality measurements and acted out other experiments to answer the question, "Why don't ducks come back in the spring?"

A few schools used the laserdisc in history or environmental studies classes, but for Lucas, a pioneer in cutting edge film technology, being ahead of the curve was a disadvantage in the field of education. The choice of technology was way ahead of its time and too expensive for most schools. Some were suspicious of "edu-tainment."

**Finding Its Mission**

Since then, Lucas says, "the Educational Foundation has really become dedicated to taking all the best ideas that are out there that people are actually experimenting with in the real world and disseminating that information to anyone who wants it or needs it."

These days, Lucas is as committed to the work of the Foundation as ever. "I'm a parent of three children and my interest in education has become even more urgent," Lucas told *NRTA Live & Learn*. "It's imperative that we create new kinds of schools, freed from an educational system deeply rooted in the distant past and the kinds of schools so many of us attended decades ago. Creating schools for the 21st century requires less time looking in the rear view mirror and more vision anticipating the road ahead," he emphasized.

**Ending the 'Isolation of the Classroom'**

A constant theme in all the Foundation's work is using technology to teach. Says Milton Chen, the Foundation's executive director since 1998. "We want to break down the artificial barrier between the classroom and the rest of the world. We would like to see kids doing local history, so young people can talk with people in the community. Students enjoy collecting data, not reading a textbook."

**More Information**

[Edutopia](#) is the Web site for The George Lucas Educational Foundation. Information about the [Edutopia Magazine](#) is also available from this site.

**Bugscope**

Video clips of The Electric Company can be found on [YouTube.com](#)

The white paper [Education Influence & Influencers](#), A Market Probe into the New Dynamics in Education, is available from the Edutopia Web site.

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country have used the Bugscope, a \$600,000 field-emission environmental scanning electron microscope at the University of Illinois's Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology in Urbana, IL. The kids capture insect specimens, send them to the university, and then use their computers to tap into and control the immensely powerful electron microscope and view their insects remotely.

### **Down on Skywalker Ranch**

Chen works from bucolic quarters at George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch in Marin County. His office is in Brook House, named for the audible brook that flows past the hillside where wild turkeys and mountain lions sometimes are seen. Chen was raised in Chicago and seems to have the perfect pedigree for his job - Harvard B.A., Stanford M. A. and Ph.D. in communications research, plus a stint as research director at Children's Television Workshop (CTW, now Sesame Workshop). There he helped develop such pioneering educational programs as "The Electric Company," a reading primer using skits by Morgan Freeman, Bill Cosby, Rita Moreno, and others. Chen capped his CTW experience with 10 years as education director at KQED, San Francisco's public television station.

"We're 90 percent focused on content creation here," says Chen of the Foundation. Today the centerpiece of the Foundation's work is its Web site [Edutopia.org](http://Edutopia.org), which functions as a continually refreshed archive of Foundation content: dozens of articles, some 100 streaming video mini documentaries and interviews about such subjects as community partnerships and mentoring; five weekly e-newsletters; and, "exhibits" of how teachers use technology in the classroom. The Web site also has a blog called Spiral Notebook, a regular poll, and the chance to offer Sage Advice.

"Teachers on the front lines who know what is going on with their students and families," says Chen, "are often not consulted about policy issues and what would work in the classroom. When we put out Sage Advice queries like 'What works in your classroom?' or 'How do you keep parents involved?' the in-box fills up within a matter of hours with hundreds of responses. This advice plus concrete examples of innovative teaching break down what both Lucas and Chen speak of as "the traditional isolation of the classroom." Chen would like to see [outstanding teachers become American cultural heroes](#).

### **Edutopian Success Stories**

*Edutopia* magazine reports on people like Thomas Payzant, outgoing head of the Boston Public Schools, where student scores climbed by tens of percentage points across categories; Paula Dawning, who traded in a corporate job at AT&T with a \$600 million budget to serve as superintendent of schools in Benton Harbor, MI; Mickey Garrison, principal of Fullerton IV Elementary School in Roseburg, OR, whose school has been honored for its cross-disciplinary approach to math instruction; and, Miss Hazel Haley, a Lakeland (Florida) High School English teacher who retired this spring

after 69 years of teaching.

"We would like to see a shift in funding for innovations in method such as project-based learning and collaborative learning," says Chen. "The first question that comes up is, 'Does it work?' Research should answer this question." The Foundation and Edutopia recently commissioned a white paper titled "Education Influence & Influencers" from Grunwald Associates.

### **America Needs Excellent Schools**

In the June 2006 issue of the *Edutopia* magazine, consultant Bob Pearlman argued the importance of keeping up in the global economy by highlighting *The World is Flat* author Thomas Friedman's reframing of the classic "Eat your supper, children are starving" story to "Finish your homework. People in India and China are starving for your job." Says Chen: "Our concern is that in the next decade the rest of the world will be changing quickly and our nation won't keep pace with those changes." The magazine covers innovative teaching in Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, and elsewhere to bring the best ideas into American schoolrooms. With Milton Chen's hands-on leadership and George Lucas's vision and financial backing, the George Lucas Educational Foundation certainly is trying to make it happen.

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#### **About the Author**

[Jane Ciabattari](#) is author of *Stealing the Fire*. Information about her book can be obtained from [Canio's Books](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).

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