

Futures studies as applied knowledge

James Dator

FUTURES STUDIES AND MODERN ACADEMIC DECISION MAKING

As I will explain a little later, at the present time, futures studies is to modern academia and societal decision making what Science was to academia and societal decision making in the late Middle Ages. Because of this, I am no more likely to get most successful academicians, politicians, and business persons to take futures studies seriously (and thus help them and their organizations to think and act more helpfully about the future), than Copernicus was in getting the powers that were in his time to recognize that the earth isn't the center of the universe. Because futures studies is not like other established fields in academia, it is constantly being misunderstood and misused.

The traditional academic world in the West (as revealed by the organization of its major universities – especially those of the United States) knows of only five kinds of academic pursuits:

First and foremost are the so-called 'natural' sciences (disciplines like physics, astronomy, chemistry, and biology with their necessary handmaiden, mathematics; more recently also earth, atmospheric and marine sciences, and their newer handmaiden, computer and information science). These are the 'real' sciences, based (by and large) on positivistic, reductionistic methods and assumptions. They set the standard for everything else.

Second, and always struggling to return to their medieval place of pride before 'science' marginalized them as the *raison d'être* for the 'liberal (i.e., liberating) arts' – or at least struggling to preserve their rank as number two – are the humanities (history, philosophy, religion, Sanskrit, Chinese, Greek, Latin, and Arabic, and perhaps the literature of and/or in contemporary foreign languages as well as one's own language). These are proudly and defiantly non- – indeed anti- – positivistic disciplines. What is wrong with the world, they might say, is the loss of tradition, discourse, criticism, gentility and mystery in the mad dominance of reductionistic and utilitarian rationalism.

Third (though often considered part of the humanities) are the performing arts: music, drama, painting, sculpture, perhaps now sometimes including film or video as beaux arts (not as a professional career). Here the emphasis is on esthetics, self-awareness, idiosyncratic self-expression, and performance. As a poster my daughter, Tasha, put up in my office long ago says, 'Dance is the only art wherein we ourselves are the stuff of which it is made.'

Fourth, and quite far behind, are the social sciences (sociology, economics, psychology, perhaps anthropology, geography, perhaps even political science). Note that these, too, are 'sciences'. That is what makes them so suspect and yet legitimate. They strive to be scientific (positivistic, reductionistic), but, alas, they cannot quite pull it off and thus are dubbed derisively as 'soft' in contrast to the true 'hard' sciences.

And finally and even farther behind (though in some places, perhaps the real number one) are the various 'applied sciences' and professional schools and disciplines – agriculture, engineering, medicine, architecture, perhaps education, law, urban planning, social work, perhaps even business and all of its subsidiary concerns. These are strictly instrumental, barely scientific, and certainly not critical. But they are very practical, hard-nosed, and successful. To many observers, they appear to be the wave of the future of higher education.

Needless to say, there are many cross-disciplinary combinations of these and the other traditional courses, and even more questionable 'new' courses, though usually they are offered in the mode of one of the five above.

The 'Index of Programs' in the 14th Annual *Directory of Graduate Programs*, published by the Graduate Record Examination Board and the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, 1991, is nineteen pages long, double column (pp. 425–444). Neither the words 'futures studies', 'futures research', 'future-oriented studies', nor any other similar set or combination of terms appears in the index – even though there are graduate programs in futures studies offered by a few American universities.

Similarly, the two-volume encyclopedia, *International Higher Education*, edited by Philip Altbach (1991), and containing authoritative discussions of higher education for virtually every country in the world, does not show that futures studies, or future-oriented studies, is offered by any university anywhere on the planet. And yet I know it is.

Given the history and curriculum of contemporary higher education, it is not surprising that most people find it difficult to understand what futures studies is, and what it is not. They quite naturally compare it with one of the five conventional streams of academia. Is it a positivistic science which presumes to predict the future? Is it merely some part of the humanities which is interested in utopias and speculative dreaming? Is it a kind

of science fiction fit for novels, movies, or television shows? Or is it a profession? Can one learn to become a consulting futurist? More to the point: can one make money as a futurist?

The answer is not clearly yes or no to any of these questions. The answer is, ‘Well, it has some of those features, but that really is not the best way to conceive of futures studies. It is indeed something else.’

At the same time, I feel that it is wrong to compare futures studies with Interdisciplinary Studies, Policy Studies, Environmental Studies, Women’s Studies, Feminist Studies, Ethnic Studies, Peace Studies, Global Studies, even Sustainability Studies, and all the other ‘... Studies’ which are growing and thriving in the halls of academe these days. These, in spite of what they may claim, are all trying in varying ways to save the old world by reforming it more or less radically. They are all the legitimate sons and daughters of modernity; of Newton and Minerva, you might say.

But futures studies is something else.

SO, WHAT IS FUTURES STUDIES?

That which we call the future – the present at a later time – is not predictable. If any person says to you: ‘I know the future. Here it is! Do this!’ then run from that person as quickly as possible. The future is not predictable. No one knows with anywhere near sufficient certainty what the future *will* be. Nonetheless the fundamental unpredictability of the future does not mean that we should therefore not concern ourselves about the future and merely trust in luck, god, or fate; or else to just prepare ourselves to muddle through when new crises suddenly arise. Rather, it means that we need to take a more appropriate stance towards the future than either a search for predictive certainty, leaving it up to fate, or trying to muddle through.

But what might that ‘more appropriate stance’ be?

First of all, ‘the future’ may be considered as emerging from the interaction of four components: events, trends, images, and actions.

Events

Events are those things which make people doubt the efficacy of thinking about the future at all. Things just seem to happen. What is going to happen next seems to be utterly unknowable. Who knows when the next war, assassination, earthquake, decision by your boss is going to toss society into a completely different direction? For example, for more than forty years, the world was locked into a Cold War which consumed trillions of dollars and gigantic amounts of human resources. Suddenly, and for no clear reason, it was over. The Wall fell. It became time to worry how

to spend the Peace Dividend. War was declared obsolete as an instrument of national policy. Only economics was said to matter any more.

Then suddenly some previously unnoticed madman, a new Hitler, was said to have emerged in the body of a former staunch ally in Iraq, and the Persian Gulf was suddenly aflame. Within **45** days, the US declared victory and America's troops returned home in Yellow Ribboned-triumph, virtually untouched. The 'Vietnam Syndrome' was said to be over and with it the American public's concern about military overspending on \$1600 screwdrivers vanished as well.

Similarly, for many years, the world eagerly, or fearfully, anticipated the emergence of 'Europe 1992' and an eventually United States of Europe. But as the Wall fell, so also did the dream of a peacefully united, economically-integrated, Europe. Instead militant tribalism of the most disgusting sort has re-emerged from nowhere. Yugoslavia has vanished in flames. Neo-Nazis murder Turks in Germany. The former mighty Soviet Union limps towards bifurcated chaos.

What's next? Who knows? The future has become completely unforeseeable once again. So why even bother? The best we can hope to do is to muddle through, given some preparedness on our part, and much luck.

Trends and emerging issues

On the other hand, many planners believe to the contrary that it is possible to discern the major contours of the future, and to plan effectively for it. They would have us focus on trends in order to anticipate and prepare for the future. But there seem to be at least three types of trends, each requiring different methods of comprehension:

- (a) There are trends which are a continuation of the present and the past. In order to understand these trends, we need to understand what is happening now, and what has happened before. Some of that understanding comes from contemplating our own life experiences. Some of it comes from understanding what the natural and social sciences tell us. Some of it may be revealed in historical, philosophical, or religious teachings and traditions. These are the kinds of trends found in most strategic plans.
- (b) Other trends are more or less cyclical. They thus are not part of our own personal experience, but they were part of some aspect of the more distant past. Here, the successes or failures of our own lives may mislead us in anticipating the future since we have never personally experienced these trends as we will in the future, or as others experienced them before us. But again, they may be recorded in historical, philosophical, or religious documents or traditions and thus be available to us indirectly through them. Other such trends may require some mathematical

technique to discover and understand. Still, because we have not personally experienced the impact of these trends, we will find it very difficult fully to know what to expect from them.

- (c) But there may be things in the future which are completely new; which have never before been humanly experienced. These trends might better be called ‘emerging issues’ because, though potentially looming in the future, they are barely visible in the present, and non-existent in the past. Many futurists would argue that the most important trends of the future are these utterly new emerging issues, and that they are themselves largely the direct or indirect consequence of new technologies which permit humans to do things they could not do before (or, conversely make it difficult for humans to do things that were easy for them to do before) and which also often change the physical environment within which humans live. Methods for determining emerging issues are quite different from the way we can measure and forecast most trends and cycles.

Now, to the extent that our own personal experiences, and the focus of most of the formal educational systems, is only on the first and second trends (and it overwhelmingly is), then most of us may find it very difficult to anticipate the future helpfully – if the futurists are correct who contend – as I certainly do – that the third, ‘emerging issue’, kind of trend is by far the most important for understanding the next thirty years and beyond. As the Pakistani futurist Sohail Inayatullah says, ‘The thing that makes the future interesting is that none of us remember it.’

Actions and images

Now, the third and fourth major factors influencing the future are the images of the future which people hold and the actions which people take on the basis of those images. Some of these actions are taken specifically with the intention of influencing the future. Others are not. But all do influence it – though seldom ever as intended!

Thus, one of the things futures studies tries to do is to help people examine and clarify their images of the future – their ideas, fears, hopes, beliefs, concerns about the future – so that they might improve the quality of their decisions which impact it.

Another thing futures studies tries to do is to help people move their images and actions beyond an attempt passively to forecast the future and then to develop plans of action on the basis of the forecasts. That is only the first step in foresight. The next step is to generate positive visions of the future – to create preferred futures – and to base planning and decisions on them. The future-envisioning workshops of the Austrian futurist, Robert Jungk, and of Elise Boulding and many others

subsequently, should be mentioned here. Learning to vision, and revision, the future, and then to plan and act in accordance, is at the heart of futures studies and futures research as applied to planning and decision-making (Jungk and Miillert, 1987).

FUTURES STUDIES, DETERMINISM, INCOHERENCE

This is what futures studies and foresight is, I believe. And because it is not something most of us have experienced in our formal education, we either assume that futures studies is impossible (and those who advocate it are frauds or flakes) or else we assume that it is like some academic orientation we do understand, such as science, or history, or art, or math. But this also misleads us because futures studies is as different from each of these as science is from art, or history is from math. While futures studies does overlap with each of these traditional academic disciplines, it is not the same as any of them.

For example, as I said earlier, foresight is not 'prediction'. Neither society nor nature is some deterministic machine which can be predicted if we just understand it correctly and collect and analyze the data properly. Rather, we live in a profoundly, and probably increasingly, incoherent society and environment. We need techniques of foresight, planning, and decision-making which acknowledge this. And we need a public (and decision-makers) who understand this, and who permit, indeed demand, the use of techniques which do not assume a deterministic universe. At the present time the public, the electorate, our clients, our boss all generally seem to want predictive certainty about the future, or else they want to hear no information about the future whatsoever. This understandable desire for false assurance is dangerous for the future of democratic society and certainly dangerous for anyone interested in the future of education (Michael, 1989).

What can and should be done, in contrast, is to place foresight, planning, and decision-making within an ongoing, multiple, 'alternative futures' context. This contrasts with the common practice of 'planning' for what is assumed to be the single 'most likely' future or several of its minor variations. To many planners and decision-makers, the most likely future seems to be that which might emerge from the continuation of existing trends. But I have already suggested that events as well as cycles and emerging issues make such an extrapolated, linear future highly unlikely indeed.

Thus plans made on the assumption that 'the present will continue' result in a variety of planning and policy disasters fairly soon, which in turn often discredit the entire attempt at planning and foresight. These failures then encourage people to ignore the future entirely and to hope that we can just muddle through somehow ignorant of things to come.

Likewise, policy made in the name of foresight after a 'one-shot' glance at certain trends, even if the trends be produced by sophisticated computer models and with great mathematical precision, is similarly inadequate and potentially dangerous. Foresight must become a routine continuing process, not a one-time affair. If you are not going to anticipate the future regularly and routinely, I suggest you don't bother to consider it at all. It is a waste of everybody's time – and probably just a whitewash of somebody else's decisions about the future – to make it a one-shot affair.

And finally, foresight that is undertaken as only a technical, scientific, and professional matter is incomplete. Foresight must also and necessarily be a political, ethical, esthetic and very broadly participative project. It must take the form of what Alvin Toffler and Clem Bezold have called, 'Anticipatory Democracy' (Bezold, 1978). It is absolutely essential that all people who have a stake in a future be involved in determining it. Obviously that means that young people – even the youngest of people – should be deeply involved in ways that make sense to them. That also means that not only the elite but all marginalized persons should participate fairly, fully, and frequently. And that is why future-oriented studies must become the heart and soul of all academic endeavors. You can't learn to do useful foresight overnight any more than you can learn to do anything else new instantly and effortlessly. Learning to exercise foresight takes lots of time and practice, with many mistakes and changes of direction.

Most of the organizations I know of which have engaged in future-oriented projects report that a very significant benefit of such activities is that they give themselves, and their constituents, a broad and common sense of what their purpose and mission is, perhaps for the first time. For example, while at one level 'everyone' knows what the purpose of education is, future-visioning processes help everyone reconsider, clarify, and unify that purpose. A secondary benefit groups discover is that people find that after having engaged in a future visioning process they then may have the political and popular support to undertake necessary reforms and thus are able to allocate resources more efficiently and effectively once a common mission has been widely sought and jointly identified. And then, to the extent envisioning and scanning the future become a normal part of the organization's activities, these benefits become also more routine and more widespread – the community becomes truly 'sustainable'. To the extent a true cross-section of the relevant public participates genuinely in these futures activities and the subsequent reforms, this public's sense of efficacy and support of sustainable community development grows.

And, if futures activities are found to be beneficial for one community, then other communities, presently unfamiliar with or suspicious of foresight, may be inspired to become more future-oriented themselves, and the future of society as a whole may become more secure and sustainable, and less chaotic and drifting.

ATTRIBUTES OF A FUTURIST

I was recently asked to describe the attributes of a futurist, or what I thought was necessary if one wanted to become a good student and practitioner of futures studies. This was my response:

To be a good futurist, you need the:

- widest possible knowledge of the history and present condition of as many cultures and civilizations as possible; knowledge of more than one culture, and thus more than one language, intimately;
- widest possible knowledge of all aspects of all the social sciences;
- widest possible knowledge of current and emerging developments in the natural sciences, and their emerging subdisciplines and transdisciplines, for example, evolutionary systems theory, chaos theory, and brain science;
- widest possible familiarity with developments in engineering (especially electronics and genetics), architecture, and space sciences;
- widest possible familiarity with philosophy, ethics, morals, and religions, and certainly the ethical discourse of as many different traditions as possible;
- widest possible familiarity with law and planning;
- an active awareness of esthetics and the esthetic element in all aspects of life. A continuing experience of esthetic expression in some, or preferably many, modes;
- creativity, imagination, the willingness to think new thoughts, to make unmade connections, to be ridiculed, laughed at, and to laugh at yourself;
- ability to synthesize, combine, invent, create;
- willingness to be politically active, to test out new ideas on yourself first and while trying actually to create a better world, or some portion of it;
- ability to try to anticipate the consequences of actions before you act, but also the willingness to risk failure and to learn from mistakes and criticism – indeed to seek out and provoke criticism – but to keep trying to do better, and constantly to relearn what ‘better’ might be;
- insatiable curiosity, unbounded compassion, incurable optimism, and an unquenchable sense of humor and delight in the absurd.

All of this can be described in one word – ‘Aiglatson’ which is ‘Nostalgia’ spelled backwards: the yearning for things to come; the remembering the future; without being disrespectful to the past (remembering that once it was all that was humanly possible), preferring the dreams of the future to the experiences of the past; always desiring to try something new; to go where no one has ever gone before in all areas of human – and non-human, and, soon, post-human – experience.

Is it possible for anyone to do that? Is it possible for anyone, given our current systems of education?

THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

So far I have said nothing about the future of education, and hence of the structure or process within which I envision futures studies to be embedded, or ‘delivered’, in the future. Let me just say that while I would be delighted to see the current campus-based higher education system continue forever, I do not expect it to survive even the 1990s, and certainly not much beyond. I agree that the future of education is a network, and not a place. Also I (regrettably) do not expect to see the continuation, much less expansion, of the unified, publicly-financed educational system into the future. Education will no longer be the ~~single-worldview-producing~~ machine it was, and was intended to be, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, there will be many competing, conflicting networks, many claiming monopoly on Truth but none having it.

FUTURES STUDIES SHOULD BE USEFUL

The development of futures studies as I understand it was very strongly influenced by attempts to apply it in real, practical grassroots situations. That specifically in my case means the old Hawaii 2000 experience of the 1960s–70s (Chaplin and Paige, 1973), and everything that flowed from it, including the establishment by the Hawaii State Legislature, in 1971, of the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies. Also, one of the reasons the Alternative Futures Option was created in the mid-1970s by the Department of Political Science of the University of Hawaii, with a strong intern component, was to satisfy a demand for people to be able to ‘do’ futures research for various governmental, commercial, civic, non-profit and other groups and individuals (Dator, 1986).

Similarly, my involvement in the creation and subsequent work of the Institute for Alternative Futures in Washington, DC, and the need thus to provide useful information about the future to its political, commercial, civic, non-profit and other clients, greatly influenced the shape and content of my understanding of futures studies. Futures studies has never been a strictly educational or theoretical enterprise to me. It has always been driven by the need to be useful both to ordinary people and to elite decision-makers without giving in to their desire to have The Wondrous Things To Come Foretold by Ye Ole Mystic Soothsayer. My understanding of futures studies has been strongly influenced (and leavened) by my experiences with the needs and ideas of these people. I suspect the same is true of many other people in the field and thus of the field

itself. I am sure that everyone learns much from such a practical, local interchange of visions, fears, plans, hopes, and actions.

FUTURES STUDIES IS LOCAL AND GLOBAL

At the same time, my involvement in futures studies has been from the very beginning not only at a local academic and community level, nor even only at a national level. Rather, through my early and continuing involvement in the World Futures Studies Federation, futures studies has also been for me, and for many others, a global and globalizing exercise. This, too, I think makes futures studies quite different from most past and present academic orientations, and itself a harbinger of the global future common for all humankind. I hope that futures studies is given the opportunity to grow and thrive. That is my challenge to each reader of these words.

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