

Critical futures study as an educational strategy

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This chapter has three main purposes. The first is to clarify the relationship between critical futures studies and critical futures research. The second is to show how each has been implemented in post-graduate courses at the University of Melbourne. The third and major purpose is to draw out some implications of this approach as an educational strategy.

For some years I pursued the development of critical futures studies as a particular approach to futures work. For reasons explained elsewhere, and outlined below, a critical approach seems highly productive and the term 'studies' appeared at first to characterize what was being attempted.' But increasingly I became aware that the sustained pursuit of such studies led on to a more substantive research orientation. The relationship between study and research therefore needed to be articulated. For example, beginning students should be expected to engage in futures studies but, initially at least, not research. The former necessarily involves an induction into the area, the latter assumes it.

Such distinctions are important for the development of futures work. Recognition and support depends upon playing the game according to accepted standards. On the other hand, I am aware that some study *is* research; that the two are not entirely separate or distinct. None the less, this is a secondary point. We must know what we mean by 'study' and 'research' in relation to critical futures work. Most beginning students will start with the former and may reasonably expect to move on to the latter at a later stage.

I taught futures studies at the University of Lancaster for some years, and then again at the University of Melbourne. Both had Departments of History, yet neither had one of Foresight or Futures Studies. In education the past is evidently of much greater interest than the future. This 'temporal chauvinism' is a long-standing concern. H.G. Wells commented upon it in the 1930s in a paper called 'Wanted: Professors of Foresight'? In the absence of a Department of Futures, the courses described in this chapter were offered from within an Education faculty. While this was not an ideal arrangement, it did mean that the articulation between futures concerns and educational ones was plain to see. Over a period of about

ten years the appeal of futures studies to students also became clear. While it still may be 'early days' in this context, the evaluations were unambiguous: futures studies clearly provides a valuable component in training and professional development at the post-graduate level.

What is it that futures studies provides, that other disciplinary foci do not? I have seen successive cohorts of students go through broadly the same process: early difficulty with new concepts, challenging language, new methodologies, soon followed by deepening insight and elation at new perspectives.³ Consequently I became convinced that such studies accomplished at least three things.

First, they allowed people to 'put things together' in new ways. That is to re-frame many conventional ideas about the world (including the move away from a 'default', taken-for-granted, static frame to a critical, dynamic and proactive one). Second, by understanding what has gone wrong in human affairs *and* the associated processes of cultural innovation and renewal, they provided individuals with the chance to achieve their own personal recovery of vision and purpose. Third, they made available the powerful symbolic resources of the futures field: concepts, language, ideas, methodologies, networks, projects, etc. These are vital because they facilitate the emergence of *a futures discourse*. To my mind it is this above all that can support the shifts of understanding, perception and policy, upon which our collective future depends.

So far as I am concerned, futures studies has already won many of the important arguments about legitimacy, applicability and relevance in educational settings. But it remains caught up in two kinds of lags. One is institutional. The universities are full of rhetoric about strategic planning, being proactive and serving their communities. Yet there is a cultural gulf between their outlook and one that takes the future as a substantive concern. Many have planning and administrative arrangements that fail to incorporate standard futures tools and methods. As noted, there are still too few Departments of Futures. On the whole, universities remain preoccupied with conservative forms of knowledge and enquiry. Admitting futures studies into the approved map of knowledge involves shifts of understanding and perception that many powerful decision-makers have yet to achieve. The second lag is related to this.

I have come to realize that there is a very considerable, but *latent*, demand for futures work both in schools and in higher education. That is, once people understand what it is, how it contributes, most find it valuable. But to reach this stage they must first know it exists, have some prior knowledge or intuition of what it provides and, finally, find a way of tapping these resources. These are demanding conditions and, naturally enough, they are not fulfilled in many places. But they will be. Long before the twenty-first century arrives there will be futures courses, debates, resources of many kinds available on the Internet.

WHAT IS CRITICAL FUTURES STUDY?

The term 'critical' is often misunderstood, particularly in the USA. However, it does not simply mean 'to criticize'. Nor does it signify a negative or derivative stance. It is not threatening and should not be construed as such. Rather, it signifies a range of methods and tools through which we may look 'beneath the surface' of social reality in order to realize the full potential of futures work.⁴ Critical futures study does recognize the *partiality* of traditions, cognitive frameworks and ways of knowing. It is therefore possible to *problematize* aspects of the existing social and economic order and to explore some of their contradictions. Why is this a constructive enterprise?

An unproblematic status quo is one which is accepted without question; one which embodies certain quasi-transcendental goals which are to be progressively realized now and in the future. Such goals could include 'health, wealth and prosperity for all humankind'. Others might be 'racial equality', 'steady growth of GNP' and 'peaceful international relations'. These all sound highly attractive. But, given the real substantive character of ideologies, assumptions, systems of exploitation, repression and destruction now in place, they may not be realizable. Like the advertisements for women's fashions or impossibly perfect holidays they have little substance.

I take the view that regardless of its very many impressive technical achievements, late industrial culture is the most rapacious, self-centred, humanly and environmentally destructive system yet seen upon the earth. It presides over numerous wars, the repressive exploitation of many Third World populations (and their underprivileged equivalents in Western countries) and the implacable destruction of the world's life-support systems. Given this context, conventional sanguine views of the future have a flat, unconvincing and, indeed, blatantly spurious quality. The standard Western worldview, far from leading to universal peace and prosperity, actually leads directly toward the abyss. It holds out no possibility whatsoever of sustainable human futures. Hence, in the extraordinary conditions of the late twentieth century, business-as-usual outlooks are positively dangerous. These uncomfortable facts tend to be missed by conventional educational discourses and practices, many of which are locked into short-term thinking and remain preoccupied with questions of status, power and control.

Hence there is value in looking in depth at this culture and asking some penetrating questions. This is exactly what critical futures study attempts to do. Calling the bluff of anodyne views of futures (or overly negative ones) helps us to isolate aspects of our present culture and way of life which urgently require critical attention. No one should doubt that this is a responsible and constructive task.

If it were *not* possible to interrogate the received wisdom of industrialized cultures, then we would most certainly be set on an irreversible path toward global catastrophe. If we were not able to understand our situation and act with informed foresight to avert the worst dangers, we would be committed to social learning by the crudest of experiences. We would have to experience catastrophe in order to prevent it! This is clearly unacceptable. The price of crisis learning becomes too great in an over-stressed and endangered world.⁵ Critical futures study therefore aligns with other critical/interpretive initiatives to explore the possibility of productive discourse about the character, assumptions and likely directions embedded within the dominant culture, as well as some lying beyond it.⁶ Some key propositions of this approach are given below.

- 1 Discourse is not neutral. It is grounded in particular traditions and speech communities which cannot, by definition, be 'objective'. Intersubjectivity is only partly rational.
- 2 It is helpful to adopt a reflexive posture; that is, one in which the observer does not simply observe (speak, act, etc.) but is aware of the active, shaping character of these processes.
- 3 A presumption is made in favour of what Habermas called 'the human emancipatory interest'; or, simply, the fundamental interest of all persons in freedom, self-constitution and unconstrained conditions of life.
- 4 It is suggested that 'progress' is no longer a term which can be used without irony. It has much less to do with tools, techniques and the external conditions of life than with (a) understanding the breakdown of a cultural synthesis at the epistemological level and (b) recovering the ability to discern a basis for qualitatively different futures.
- 5 Technologies are not regarded merely as neutral tools but as cultural processes embodying specific ideological and social interests. The most notable features of technologies are often invisible and intangible (which is why they are overlooked by empiricist approaches).
- 6 Stories are regarded as powerful explanatory devices. They are not 'mere fiction' because they model human reality in novel and useful ways. They can therefore be used to explore some aspects of human futures in ways not accessible to reason, analysis or the techniques of futures research (such as forecasting).
- 7 There is an explicit focus on *the negotiation of meanings* (such as work, leisure, defence, health). This gives access to some of the most important shaping processes involved in social and cultural change, including those associated with cultural editing.⁷

The origins of these propositions lie in a number of related fields. They include the following:

- o the interpretative perspective, itself emerging from critical practice, hermeneutics, the analysis of discourse and semiotics;
- o the sociology of science and technology: science as a social product, technology as cultural text;
- o the critical theory of society: cognitive interests, Habermas' theory of communicative action, etc. Foucault's analysis of power;
- o speculative writing: stories which comment with awareness on past, present and a wide range of futures;
- environmental scanning and strategic planning: techniques of futures research applied in organizations.

The careful use of these cultural and symbolic resources provides futures study and research with some powerful metatheoretical tools.

TEACHING CRITICAL FUTURES STUDY

Critical futures study can be defined as *the application of critical futures concepts, ideas, theories to futures problems*. Teaching it is first and foremost a matter of providing an induction into the conceptual and methodological aspects of a futures discourse. It is about learning the language, engaging with the literature, clarifying understandings and joining a global conversation with peers. An outline syllabus for an introductory post-graduate course on critical futures studies could include such elements as: an introduction to the futures field, building blocks of the approach, case studies, analysis of the industrial worldview, cultural innovation and the recovery of meaning, imaging futures, and futures study in education.

Specific foci for critical futures study may include:

- o critical analysis of discourse and ideological interests;
- o the critique of worldview assumptions and practices;
- o the reconceptualization of 'world problems';
- o analysis of person/person, person/nature and person/machine relations;
- o dealing with fears and concerns about futures; and
- o the design and implementation of futures curricula.

From this outline, critical futures study is seen as *a scholarly and applied activity*. It is not a science and it does not search for laws. It is certainly not concerned with prediction, nor even forecasting (though it may use, or refer to, forecasts, trends and the like). It has nothing to do with the so-called 'futures market', and nothing whatsoever to do with crystal balls and the latest commentaries on Nostradamus. Such activities belong to vastly different traditions of enquiry and action.

Rather, critical futures study seeks to provide a critical purchase on our historical predicament. It attempts to develop and refine tools of understanding that, on the one hand, reveal processes of cultural formation,

cultural editing and, on the other, reveal options for intervention and choice. It seems to me that when this work is successful it has a number of outcomes: a new (or renewed) ability to diagnose 'where we are', to clarify what is at stake, to reconceptualize 'the problem' and to re-direct human effort through self-constitution and cultural innovation. In educational terms these outcomes mean that teaching and learning can be re-connected to 'the big picture', the wider world.

Critical futures study is therefore not social science, though again, it may *use* some of the tools of the latter. It is not 'owned' by a professional elite, though it is certainly aided by practitioners and futures organizations. It is, perhaps, as much *a cultural formation* as an academic discipline, in part because it incorporates some elements of the futures-related social innovation movements. However, an academic 'backbone' is essential. Critical futures study flourishes where it has access to the skills and other resources available through scholarship. It also requires political and organizational skill and a range of humanistic competencies. The latter are expressed in futures workshops and other facilitative milieux where people are actively engaged in futures visioning, design and implementation?

In summary, critical futures study combines rational intelligence with intuitive and visionary abilities to provide a forward-looking context in which some of the 'big questions' can be posed and answered. 'Where are we going? How do we get there? What problems need to be solved? And why take this path rather than another?' Such questions are too central to be overlooked. Yet they go well beyond those that tend to be asked in related fields such as critical theory and cultural studies.

CRITICAL FUTURES RESEARCH

Critical futures research emerges from the above. A working definition would perhaps see it as *the attempt to generate new knowledge about the constitution of human futures*. Obviously, such knowledge cannot be limited to particular domains. It will routinely cross existing disciplinary boundaries and often challenge settled norms and procedures. Like critical futures studies, this approach to research differs from futures research *per se* in that it is not primarily concerned with using and applying the standard methodologies (such as scenarios, matrices, Delphi and the like). Rather, these are utilized sparingly and more commonly seen as part of the subject matter. Critical futures research has a number of characteristic foci which include the following:

- o research into the social construction of temporality;
- o the formation, negotiation and significance of images of futures;
- o the clarification of social learning processes and the application of social inventions:

- o the evolution of post-modern outlooks and worldviews;
- the re-formulation and re-presentation of knowledge for global and futures-oriented uses;
- o the development of an ethical basis for acknowledging our responsibilities to future generations; and
- o the study and implementation of foresight.

While, as noted, critical futures studies and research cannot be completely separated, it can be seen that the latter assumes a mastery of the former and is applied to more extended and demanding areas. It may be used to create and refine knowledge that will help to focus and implement futures initiatives or projects. For example, while critical futures studies may merely survey and/or critique young people's fears about futures, critical futures research would move on to consider the grounds of systemic solutions within a renewed worldview and culture.

The methodologies involved in critical futures research are derived from the critical/hermeneutic skills and metatheoretical perspectives outlined above.⁹ They include the study of different types of futures discourses, of paradigm phenomena, of foresight contexts and the conscious design of post-modern worldviews.¹⁰ An example of a post-graduate research course is discussed below.

AN OUTLINE OF THREE COURSES

Three futures courses were offered at Melbourne. One was a strand of a Diploma in Education course for post-graduate students who would normally proceed to teach after the diploma year. It was basically an introductory course organized around the theme of *Social Change: Problems and Prospects*. This title deliberately played down the futures component. The course was interactive and formal lecturing was held to a minimum. The emphasis was on group processes such as critical reading, reporting, discussion, workshops, negotiation and role-play.

The course was spread over two semesters, interrupted by three rounds of teaching practice. In the first ten or so sessions the students were introduced to a number of introductory themes such as: young people's views of futures, dealing with fears, futures in the media, origins and development of futures education, concepts and principles of teaching futures. Each two-hour session was different, but always included one practical futures teaching tool or technique per week. This served to build up a professionally useful repertoire from the start.

The second series of meetings in semester two looked at aspects of the 'ideabase' of critical futures work. Session themes included: understanding the present cultural transition, the foresight principle and the grounds of (socio-cultural) recovery. The aim here was to open up a couple of

intellectual perspectives on the field and, most importantly, to show students that there are many sources of insight, empowerment and creativity which can be drawn on by teachers and students. Overall, the Dip. Ed. course served as a mainly practical introduction to futures studies in education.

Two Master's courses were also offered. The first was a Master's qualifying year 5 course (or year 1). The second was a Master's year 6 (or year 2) offering. The former was originally entitled: *Futures Study and Curriculum Innovation* but was later re-named *Education for the 21st Century*, partly to tie in with the book of that title." It was intended to be a foundation course in the application of critical futures methods to curriculum issues and problems. The aims of the course were as follows:

- o to introduce students to the futures field and a range of educationally relevant concepts and methodologies;
- o to show how critical futures methods can be applied to curriculum problems;
- o to provide a framework for the analysis of the global problematique and its pedagogic implications;
- o to examine the nature of the transition from industrialism in the context of Australian history and culture;
- o to consider the role of Australian education in (a) exploring solutions to global problems and (b) supporting shifts toward more sustainable ways of life.

The course began with an overview of the futures field and used case studies to explore a range of concerns. These included: the nature of the industrial worldview; the transition from industrialism; technology and cultural texts; responding to uncertainty; and curriculum responses to structural change. The latter part of the course re-interpreted the curriculum in the light of the above and showed how such concepts and methods can be employed in explicitly forward-looking curriculum innovation.

The rationale for the course was based on the fact that the global transition from industrialism has rendered many assumptions, meanings and practices obsolete. Given its innate conservatism, this was (and remains) perhaps even more true in education than elsewhere. There is an urgent need to move away from crisis management, short-termism and merely coping with change. Developing a more active and strategic stance must be much more than rhetoric. It requires practical competencies such as reading signals from the environment, interpreting their significance and developing appropriate responses. All educational processes require a forward-looking or prospective view and effective means of responding to change.

The course rationale also suggested that critical futures methods provide a means of understanding our cultural transition and reflecting upon the

shifts of value and meaning which may underpin forward-looking curriculum innovation. This explains why the course drew on sources *outside* education: the sociology of science and of knowledge, hermeneutics, critical practice, speculative writing, futures workshop techniques and the futures field *per se*. In summary, the course provided an introduction to critical futures study and its utilization for the design, implementation and assessment of school curricula. It provided a foundation for curriculum innovation in a range of subject areas, and opportunities to review educational policy and practice in relation to wider structural shifts in society and culture.

The Master's year 6 course (M6) had a complementary, but different orientation. *Education, Foresight and Cultural Change* was a more advanced course in the application of critical futures methods to research problems and implementation issues. All those taking the course participated in continuing research and carried out their own small-scale studies. Students were required to carry out a research project involving the study of foresight in an organization. This involved asking questions like, how does the organization scan its environment; look ahead; make decisions; pursue strategies? In this context, examples of good practice provided models for emulation, while poor practice provided opportunities to consider improvements.

The taught components of the course covered topics such as: the epistemology of futures scanning, implementing foresight, foresight and national policy, foresight through art and literature, and foresight and cultural change. Methodologies were taught in a workshop format and covered such topics as: environmental scanning skills, team-building and the use of the Futurescan technique. All gained an extra dimension by being explored through a *critical* futures framework. The course led on to a range of further options, including a PhD thesis and doctoral seminars.

It quickly became evident that foresight provides an ideal focus for post-graduate work. It is a significant human capacity at the individual level, but its implementation at the organizational and social levels is less common. It is used by some large organizations for strategic planning purposes. A foresight tradition is developing at the state and federal level in the USA and elsewhere. Yet in spite of the undermining of traditional structures and expectations by a range of powerful change processes, foresight work in the public interest remains rare.¹²

The course objectives reflected this concern. On completing the subject students were expected to be able to:

- critically evaluate educational processes in terms of underlying cultural commitments, assumptions and temporal orientations;
- demonstrate their understanding of the principles and practice of foresight methods and approaches through critical/empirical research work;

- o participate in the study of foresight contexts, and
- o contribute original thinking/research to the field.

Overall, the M6 course provided a range of opportunities to move beyond the induction and familiarization process toward research and the implementation of foresight in various contexts.

Evaluation and outcomes

The Master's courses outlined here were offered annually, sometimes in an intensive summer school format. Unfortunately evaluation has sometimes been a weak point in the field, so particular care was needed. All were evaluated by student questionnaires, interviews or structured group discussion. This was necessary for legitimation purposes as well as for developmental ones.

General tone of the evaluations

It is clear from the responses that these were successful courses. While they certainly challenged the participants, the latter obviously enjoyed them and gained a lot from them. Some factors mentioned were: insight, empowerment, new perspectives, hope, courage, an extra dimension and making greater sense of existing ideas. Positive comments were also made about: use of media, the sense of collaboration and community-building, the refreshing character of original and stimulating material from sources outside education and the value of maintaining current links with international colleagues and organizations.

Areas of difficulty

A number of respondents mentioned problems with some terminology, reading and unfamiliar concepts. It was acknowledged that these do present difficulties for those who begin such courses without prior knowledge of futures studies. However, it is also significant that one person noted: 'after a while it all comes together'. **So**, while steps can be taken to ease the transition, it seems clear that time for reading, reflecting, clarifying, discussing ideas, etc., is necessary for all students. People who *actively engage with the material* normally experience this movement toward clarity and integration after a few weeks. Tools such as annotated bibliographies and futures glossaries can also be a great help."

At the M6 level, and in summer school format, the problems of running such courses for mixed groups with, and without, prior knowledge of the area sometimes created real difficulties. Those who had done the earlier course possessed an extensive understanding of the conceptual structures

of futures study and therefore moved easily on to more demanding, research-oriented work. One way to address this problem was to require prerequisites of new students; for example, in-depth reviews of two books from a core list. However, not all students actually completed the reading in time.

Areas for improvement

Several areas for improvement were mentioned. One was the need for more structured discussion times. I tried to avoid imposing too much structure on discussions because I preferred a collegial approach which gives people sufficient time/space to draw on experience and make comment. However, since some time-wasting was noted on occasions, strategies were also needed for reducing it.

A second area was the relative lack of local content. This was a valid criticism. I had taken some trouble to scan local publications and media for material, but this was not always easy to find in Australia. Another option was to use local people and organizations whenever possible.

Thirdly, more explicit links between theory and practice were requested. This, again, became a developmental task. My first concern in setting up new courses had been to provide an appropriate framework – including the nature of the conceptual outline, teaching sequence, materials and access to literature. However, as time went by and the framework became established, attention turned to exemplifying some of the theory by developing clearer links with concrete practices, for example curriculum planning, environmental scanning, forecasting, creative and business enterprises. This was achieved through case studies, visiting speakers and appropriate use of local media.

Areas for development

Surprisingly (at least to me) the main area suggested for further development was methodology. A number of people felt that a separate course was desirable, and in principle it was possible. However, as a single member of staff with sole responsibility for a rapidly growing area like futures it was beyond my ability to provide it.

In conclusion, the evaluations provided firm evidence that the courses worked out pretty much as intended. However, the points outlined above show that there was certainly room for improvement. Some responses could be made at the individual and institutional level, while others required wider co-operation and support. But as futures educators well know, these are not always available. Despite clear academic standing and strong student approval, the hierarchies of universities often overlook futures studies altogether. Why is this?

CHALLENGES FOR FUTURES EDUCATORS

The above suggests that futures studies can be successfully integrated into the post-graduate programme of a major university department such as an Institute of Education. However, there are clearly difficulties to overcome before such work becomes commonplace. Teaching futures at the tertiary level is an idea which has made steady progress over the last quarter-century, but its time is yet to come: it still has some way to go before it is universally regarded as a legitimate part of the intellectual mainstream. On the other hand, the potential of educational futures has been appreciated for well over twenty years.¹⁴ So it is essential to try to understand the gap between aspiration and reality. Michael Marien has suggested four factors which may help explain this gap.

- 1 Academic institutions favour vertical depth over horizontal breadth, retain ancient boundaries and have few resources for experimentation.
- 2 Futures organizations have declined in membership, or simply failed to grow. Organizations like the Club of Rome have lost visibility and impact.
- 3 The future can seem too difficult to study and there is evidence that time-horizons are shrinking.
- 4 The above factors are exacerbated by 'infoglut'; i.e. information overload and the fragmentation it encourages.¹⁵

To this can be added the following.

The US model of futures studies at the school level did not travel well. While many practical teaching tools and innovations were successfully developed in US schools, colleges and some universities, implementation tended to be of a higher quality than accounts written of it. It was therefore possible for the 'intellectual gatekeepers' in universities and elsewhere to sideline these innovations and to miss their significance. Some of the early futures literature became a liability because its repetitious description of 'world problems' and 'solutions' missed the point in certain ways. When a deeper analysis is overlooked, the prescriptions of futurists can be readily dismissed. It is therefore unsurprising that futurists were not particularly welcome when they tried to penetrate the advanced and interrogative discourses of higher learning.

Those who begin to teach futures studies in isolation tend to use what they find to hand. However, often this turns out to involve *extrapolating* from the present. An issues-based 'future of ...' approach tends to enlarge or exaggerate aspects of the present world. In many cases an underlying assumption remains that of *a basically static frame of reference*. While exploring some superficial changes, an extrapolative approach also assumes that present ways of life possess more strength and durability than, in fact, they have. It is a mistake to overlook deeper shifts and phenomena.

A close look at futures modules, curricula and projects suggests that in many cases inadequate attention was paid to evaluation. This means that futures studies may be seen as purely 'inspirational' and marginalized on spurious grounds. But why should they be marginalized?

It is clear that critical futures studies and research do not automatically align with the dominant norms of growth-oriented, resource-intensive and habitually short-termist societies. On balance, and the corporate sector notwithstanding, there tends to be a hidden opposition of interests between the best futures work and much of the underlying 'software' of Western societies. This hidden opposition of interests and agendas is, perhaps, the basic reason why futures studies have not yet entered the intellectual mainstream. The former have confronted powerfully embedded cultural and economic forces but, in lacking critical, counter-vailing power, they have engaged in a very unequal struggle.

If this analysis is correct, futures studies and research will find it hard to achieve their full potential until they become securely grounded in more durable, penetrating methods and approaches. At minimum this may involve: providing a penetrating critique/diagnosis of industrial era psychology, epistemology and worldviews; utilizing critical futures tools for re-negotiating deeply embedded cultural values and assumptions; and making the role of futures clearer to many more people than at present. Since these are by no means easy tasks, it follows that futures study and research will take longer to become fully established than many would wish.

In the meantime, innovators can certainly take heart: the underlying impulses driving futures work are strengthening, as is the *Structural* need for quality, well-founded futures work. The structural imperative arises from fundamentally changing conditions of life: the need to manage the biosphere and reduce the threat of war, the challenge of powerful new technologies and the need to reduce the escalating costs of social learning by crude experience.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

It is clear from the above that critical futures study and research have grown out of a critique of the dominant empirical/rational tradition of futures research and the development and use of new intellectual and methodological tools. They address futures concerns at a deeper level than can normally be accessed by empirical/rational approaches. They operate at the level of constitutive understandings about social and cultural life. Such work typically involves comparative analysis of assumptions, pre-suppositions, paradigms, ways of knowing, interests, power relationships and different cultural traditions. Why is this approach fruitful?

Much of the early futures literature considered 'world problems' and proffered a variety of 'solutions'. But the fact is that very *many 'problems' have no solution at the level upon which they are first experienced or described*. This has frequently been overlooked in fields which are over-reliant upon empiricist assumptions and methods (measuring, calculating, instrumental reasoning). In this context the partiality of cultural traditions, of disciplinary paradigms and ways of knowing has been largely overlooked. Similarly, the role of language in actively shaping perception and mediating views of the world was often missed. Hence 'problems' tended to be described in superficial, culturally specific and taken-for-granted ways. This led to the familiar 'litany' of global concerns and a number of repetitious books, many of which ended up saying much the same thing.

By contrast, *a critical futures approach reveals the embedded systems which lie behind everyday experience*. In one dimension these spread through space and time and, in another, they extend throughout the socio-cultural matrix in the form of ideologies (e.g. planned obsolescence) and cultural assumptions (e.g. we are separate from nature and can therefore abuse it). Few individuals could be expected to unravel these relationships on their own. **So** it is important to establish a method for dealing with them.

One place to start is with what I term the 'architectural metaphor'. This draws a parallel between physical architecture and social architecture. While the former is built upon a physical substructure and foundation, the latter is founded upon a structure of norms, assumptions, etc. and also upon a worldview or paradigm. The worldview contains a number of key assumptions: about the nature of reality, of nature, human nature, time, meaning, purpose and so on. Critical futures work suggests that many of the problems we face in the everyday world arguably have their origin (and their possible resolutions) at one or more of these deeper levels.

It follows that *futures work which misses the shaping significance of socio-cultural foundations will increasingly be seen as naïve and superficial*. This is *so* because it misses the richest opportunities for problem-solving, re-conceptualization and cultural renewal. The latter cannot be identified merely with changes in surface structures. We have to deal in depth with the problematics of cultures in stress and in transition. **So** it is useful to recognize distinct levels in futures work. Four possibilities are given in Table 7.1. *Pop futurism* tends to be technophilic, conservative and diversionary. It thrives in mass market TV programmes and in the popular press. It can be marketed. *Problem-focused futures study* is often earnest and well-meaning, but its prescriptions lack credibility for the reasons given above. *Critical futures study and research* is still fairly uncommon, but some of the best futures work available draws upon critical sources and traditions of enquiry. Finally, *epistemological futures study* provides the necessary depth.

Table 7.1 Levels of futures work

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- 1 POP FUTURISM: takes existing social relations as given; ideologically naive; provides unconscious support for status quo; futures constructed externally via science and technology. EG. *Future Shock* (Toffler 1970).
 - 2 PROBLEM-FOCUSED FUTURES STUDY: identifies problems and seeks to explore solutions at a superficial, taken-for-granted level. EG. *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows 1972).
 - 3 CRITICAL FUTURES STUDY: comparative analysis of assumptions, pre-suppositions, paradigms; actively considers the influence of different cultural orientations and traditions of enquiry. EG. *The Politics of the Solar Age* (Henderson 1988).
 - 4 EPISTEMOLOGICAL FUTURES STUDY: locates and problematizes sources of 'problems' in worldviews and ways of knowing; sees 'solutions' as arising from deep-seated and unpredictable shifts at this level. EG. *The Reenchantment of the World* (Berman 1981) and *Eye to Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm* (Wilber 1990).¹⁶
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As one moves from level 1 to level 4, an increasingly rich array of options present themselves. At the most superficial level one remains imprisoned by unregarded 'givens' and unstated assumptions. It is true that the deeper one goes, the more demanding the work. But, equally, greater scope exists to look freshly upon assumptions and meanings which have come to seem natural and inevitable, but are in fact not so. At the epistemological level futures work merges imperceptibly into the kind of fundamental re-thinking which is clearly philosophical in character and orientation. Here is one of the key bridges between futures work and the older, better-established disciplines.

These are welcome developments. For it is here in the foundations of culture that all 'world problems' have their origins. Equally, 'solutions' will not emerge from ill-founded analysis or superficial tinkering. They will not grow from media hype or pop futurism. They will not result from empirical/analytic work which ignores the foundations of the social order. *Effective solutions will involve deep-seated shifts of perception, value and understanding at the deeper levels.* This means that work at the tertiary level will always remain vital. It also suggests that futures workers in different traditions, as well as futurists and educators, should all work much more closely together.

CONCLUSION: CRITICAL FUTURES STUDY AS AN EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY

This chapter has outlined some propositions about critical futures study and research in higher education. It has discussed how they have been

implemented at the tertiary level over the course of a decade. I have concentrated on this level because it has great symbolic power and performs a wide range of servicing and gatekeeping roles for other educational levels. However, I want to affirm that over the last quarter-century much good work has also been done at primary and secondary levels.¹⁷ (See Chapters 6 and 8 by Page and Hutchinson respectively).

I conclude that besides being an appropriate focus of disciplined enquiry in tertiary contexts, futures study is indeed a core dimension of education at all levels. While it can be, and often is, successfully introduced as a secondary subject,¹⁸ it is not *merely* another subject entering into competition with others in an overcrowded curriculum. Even at this relatively early stage it can be regarded as a true metaperspective grounded in the coherent body of theory and practice which I have tried to sketch in here. Equally, we should not forget that a very substantial part of such work is not owned by futurists at all. I refer to the standard skills of scholarship: clear expression, careful argument, fit with the evidence, and *so* on. These are common starting points for advanced enquiry and this is also where students and teachers of futures must begin.

The justification for regarding critical futures study as an educational strategy is that it brings two vital gifts that are all too rare in other contexts. One is the gift of a futures perspective, with its advanced discourse, methods and literature. The other is the rich insights it provides into the constitution of viable human futures. By carefully questioning what is frequently taken for granted (such as continuous economic growth, ethnocentricity or the marketing imperative) it is possible to distinguish new personal and social options. *This 'unfreezing' of the status quo has powerful implications: it provides us with new (or renewed) sources of freedom. It also permits a much wider variety of alternatives to be imagined and explored than are conceivable from within a dominant, catastrophe-prone paradigm.* It is for such reasons that critical futures study can contribute toward a re-invigorated educational enterprise. We should also expect an increase in strategic thinking, constructive, empowering attitudes and, overall, an enhanced 'steering capacity' for individuals, groups, organizations and the wider society. Together these provide an enhanced ability to engage in the critical and practical tasks of moving away from unproductive, destructive and chronically short-sighted ways of life toward new stages of personal and cultural development.

Those who are now in the teaching force and who are being prepared for it are frequently told that they hold 'the future' in their hands. They are also told that the young people they are dealing with are 'the citizens of the twenty-first century'. However, the vast majority of education systems throughout the world lack anything approaching a substantive futures perspective. **So** the deliberate introduction of futures studies (critical or otherwise) as a foundation discipline of education is long

overdue. As the twenty-first century approaches, schools, colleges and universities that attempt to make the shift into a new millennium without some of the tools and understandings outlined here will find themselves backing into an increasingly tight corner. Those who do take them up will discover many new personal and professional options. Futures studies have a vital role to play in all the key areas of educational practice, including curriculum innovation, teacher preparation, professional development and the training and support of principals.¹⁹

At the end of the day it is really very straightforward: all teaching, learning and research is *from* the past and *for* the future. The latter is the primary focus for all education because *education is an inherently forward-looking enterprise* and the future looks increasingly different to the past. The prospect may be daunting, but there are undoubtedly grounds for informed optimism and many paths beyond every imaginable disaster.²⁰

There are few really substantial barriers to prevent the expansion of futures studies and research in education. It remains basically a question of picking up the available tools, adapting them and using them for a range of purposes.²¹

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