

Anticipatory action learning: Theory and practice

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Abstract

Anticipatory action learning (AAL) draws from action learning/research traditions and Futures Studies to develop a unique style of questioning the future with intent to transform organization and society. Case studies from futures workshops are used to illustrate the main points of anticipatory action learning. These are: (1) sensitivity to the environment—workshop dynamics and ways of learning/knowing of participants, (2) questioning leads to anxiety in the organization, (3) anticipatory action learning can be easily appropriated, (4) resistance must be named, understood and transformed, and (5) the future is deepened by authentic understanding of the other.

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1. Situating anticipatory action learning

Traditional research is empirical and present based. Action learning and research is also present-based, however it is reflexive, with learning derived both from questioning programmed knowledge and from doing.

Futures research, by definition, is future focused, having empirical, interpretive and critical dimensions. While there are no future facts, ‘images’ of the future held by actors can be studied and trends extrapolated. The meanings that are given to images and trends can be qualitatively explored. What is missing from these investigations, from official and dissenting futures, can be critically judged through deconstruction [4].

Recent efforts in the futures field have focused on anticipatory action learning [5]. In this type of learning, the future received—the official nomination—is questioned so that other futures can be created. Once an alternative future is created, the questioning process, however, does not end. There is a reflexive process of questioning, creation and questioning. This practice adds an anticipatory dimension to action learning (Fig. 1).

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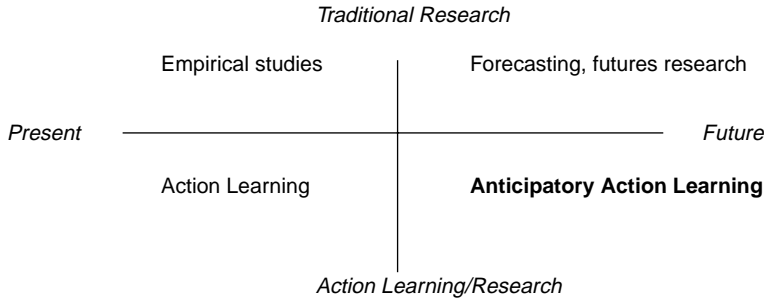


Fig. 1. Anticipatory action learning.

Anticipatory action learning thus differs from not only traditional, present-based research but is also different from most *futures* research. Anticipatory action learning/research is collaborative, and works within the epistemological framework of participation.

It differs from futures research by (1) being less driven by expert forecasts and being more attuned to participatory learning processes, particularly questioning; (2) the category of ‘future’ is not a priori given but emerges through the questioning process, it is based on the knowing categories of participants, and (3) while critical, it does not accede to any particular tradition of critical theory (Continental or Indic, for example) but rather draws from the actors’ own epistemological categories.

1.1. *The double context*

Relatively young, anticipatory action learning draws on three separate but interrelated traditions. First is that of western-based action learning. This has been championed by Reg Revans [8]. His main point is that learning equals programmed knowledge plus questioning. The second tradition draws from third world centred participatory action research. The founders are numerous,¹ but the main point is that the subjects of action (research subjects, those that are to be developed) must be foundational in the enterprise, whether it be learning, economic development or social mobilization. Change must occur with and through those being impacted—indeed through their categories of knowledge. Third is Futures Studies, an emerging field, certainly a current discourse, focused on the mapping, anticipating, deepening and transforming the meanings and understandings of change, particularly future time.

From these traditions, four points are crucial:

- 1 Learning is not just programmed knowledge plus questioning, but programmed knowledge plus questioning of the future.
- 2 Questioning the futures means seeking to understand the default future we are given, challenge it (unpack, understand if it is a used futures)² and create desired futures. Thus, not

¹ Orlando Fals-Borda and Akhtar Hameed Khan are crucial here, both working in the area of Participatory Development.

² Used-futures are often colonized futures. Rejected by the dominant, the colonized then pick them up. For example, many North American cities are moving away from the biggest-is-best view of city planning and more toward community making (the healthy cities movement, for example), while at the same time East Asian cities all vie for the largest building. They have purchased a used-future, recently discarded by Western cities.

just the context, the product, the process, as in conventional action learning, but the future itself is challenged, and thereby recreated.

- 3 The future that is questioned has varied dimensions. These include the exploration of possible (the full range of agency and imagination), probable (likely given historical structures) and preferred (where we seek to go) futures. The future is thereby not just out there, a blank space, but rather space-time-person coordinate that has already been created, is always in the process of being created. By questioning it, we can reinforce this future, or if undesired, search for alternative different futures.
- 4 Anticipatory action learning straddles the boundary between the content of the future (uncertain and contingent alternatives) and the process of discovery of the future—both are in dialectical tension and relationship.

1.2. A difficult task

Anticipatory action learning, as defined, cannot be easy. First futurists *qua* trend analysts forecast the future. They seek to strengthen programmed knowledge in areas where there is very little of it. The future is in the arena of what we do not know. Trend analysis makes it knowable.

Second futurists *qua* scenario planners seek to contour the unknown future through exploring what we know we do not know. Where knowledge is contingent, uncertain, scenarios help bound this uncertainty...risk is better managed.

In both these cases, the gaps in programmed knowledge are filled. Where then is the questioning?

Third, questioning occurs through a process of challenging the official future (and first understanding that we are living an official future, often unknown to us). Questioning means to explore: Is this future our desired future? Is this the future of others? How did it come about (its genealogy)? What are alternatives to it? Which is owned? Which is disowned?

Fourth, questioning as well means unpacking the epistemological context of these very questions. This is an open-ended process where the way individuals and community metaphor the future is explored. Initially, this means asking questions as to the nature of the future. Do they see the future as a roller coaster (ups and downs of life)? As an onion (multiple layers to be unpacked)? As a wide ocean (endless choices)? As a spider web (a network of relationships)? Thus programmed views of the future are understood.

Next is engaging in a process where individuals and group use the future in a discourse that is self-referential, that makes sense to the meaning-making community or individual. The future—is it about forward time, or imagined pasts, or dreamtime loops of past, present and future—is thus constructed within the terms of the subject. Metaphors thus are not seen as universal but as particular to epistemic communities.

As important as the social construction of the future is the ownership of the future created. This is the political-economy of the future—how ownership circulates through meaning iterations. Related to this is the genealogy of the future—how the particular construction (metaphor) has become dominant and how other nominations have been lost or marginalized.

Being engaged in this type of futures studies and action learning required a foundational, indeed, ontological, sensitivity to the Other; that the Other exists and lives in categories that are outside our knowing. Indeed, I would say the Other is the realm of what we do not know we do not know. Neither programmed knowledge nor conventional questioning takes us here, since questioning privileges a certain nomination of mind—of the authority of the intellect.

Epistemological ruptures move us in this new post-rational direction. The future thus is unknown and our theories and methods—based on current valorizations—will not help. It is not just liberation from conventional and used futures but also from the intellect that creates this questioning [7].

1.3. Commonalities

Action learning and futures studies potentially have a great deal in common, not only in terms of their disruptive methodological orientation but also in their intention to create a different world, to understand selves and processes in different terms—to see what is not commonly seen and create what is not commonly known. By moving out of conventional frames of reference, both approaches allow inquiry to move from litany, immediate concerns and epistemological assumptions to deeper causal, structural, worldview and myth levels. Other ways of knowing—the multicultural turn—can thus naturally find space to be expressed.

Action learning and futures studies also have a commitment to connecting desired states in the future with the present. Thus, within futures studies, instead of taking a means-ends planning approach, participants attempt to ‘backcast’ the future. The future imagined is thus related to the past. The trajectory from the present to the future is remembered. This memory becomes translated into not so much a plan—which is only guise for non-action—but as with action learning, concrete experiments, a new program, or a new project, for example. The success or failure of these experiments can then feed back into the desired visions. Through action learning experimentation the vision can thus retain its robustness.

2. Futures workshops

The futures workshop pattern I use is based on the sequence, MAMDCT: (1) mapping past, present and future using the futures triangle method; (2) anticipating the future using emerging issues analysis; (4) lengthening the future using patterns gleaned from macrohistory [3]; (3) deepening the future using the Causal Layered Analysis method and four quadrant mapping; (5) creating alternatives through scenarios; and (6) transforming the future using visioning, backcasting and the transcend conflict resolution method.³

In futures workshops and consultancies project, I first map the history of the present by working with individuals to discuss the key events or trends that led to the present—legislation, new technologies, cultural shifts, and so forth. From this present, I move to mapping the future(s). The method I use for this is the futures triangle which has three dimensions: (1) the pull—dominant and contending images of the future; (2) the push: trends such as demographics, technology, globalisation; and (3) the weight—deep patterns that are resistant to change (patriarchy, feudal structures, silos). By mapping the future, different strategies can be developed. Questions that are derived include: Should we alter the push, create a new image, challenge the weights? Of course, all triangles are different, some institutions are skewed toward weights, others toward the images and still others toward the push (Fig. 2).

Anticipating the future uses the emerging issues analysis method, which is focused on moving beyond current problems (and past problems) to quantitative trends and finally to emerging issues (15–20 years forward in time).

³ See the works of Johan Galtung. www.transcend.org.

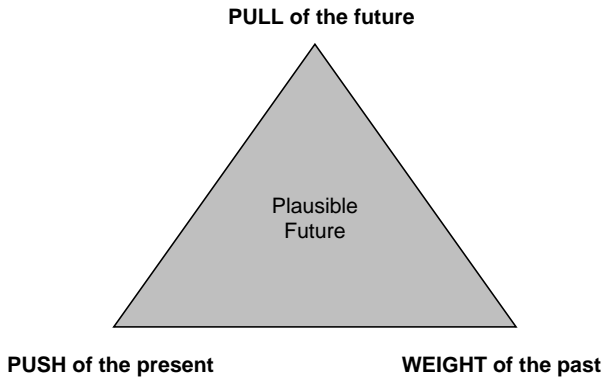


Fig. 2. The futures triangle.

Alongside emerging issues is macrohistory or lengthening the future. I use macrohistory and macrohistorians to expand the temporal frame by going backward and forward. This is the search for deeper patterns of change, and seeks to understand the stages of history and the shape of the future. The questions raised by macrohistorians can be used to give insight into the dynamics of any organizational and societal change. This is macrohistory as method—asking what are the future trajectories—linear, cyclical, pendulum or spiral, for example. Can we anticipate the probable direction of the organization?

Macrohistory grounds institutional change in historical change. Macrohistory does not predict the future per se but questions the deeper patterns the organization is following, asking is the pattern intentional or desirable? Are there other more appropriate, more useful, patterns? Without macrohistory, the future remains fanciful, and overly based on the influence of new technologies. One pattern is often assumed as the only pattern. An ecology of future possibilities is not investigated. Organizations undergoing a linear rise rarely imagine that they may be at a peak, and about to undergo a cyclical change. History is ignored for the new future.

Deepening begins the unpacking task—what is beyond the litany of events and trends? What systems cause current problems? What are systemic interventions? And what is beneath the system—what discourses are dominant? That is, what are the main causes of the systems? Which worldviews define the problem? And beneath that again is: which myths and metaphors, stories, is the organizational living?

At this last level, I ask what are the foundational metaphors of individuals and the organization itself? How do they see the future? This leads to four quadrant mapping, which consists of asking a range of questions, including: what meanings do individuals bring to the future? What are their behaviors? What are the external strategies of the collective? And, most significantly, what is the map of the unconscious collective? Through a process of group inquiry—asking participants their metaphors of the future, metaphors of their organization, stories they tell about their organization—a map is created. This map allows the group to explore deeper motivations and understanding behind official strategic plans.

This deepening leads to creating alternatives. However, any such alternatives are not merely based on a recollecting, a recounting of the litany of problems, but on the emerging issues, macrohistories, worldviews and stories. Alternatives have ontological depth, rather than simply rehearsing the current problem of the day. In this way they can lead to institutional transformation.

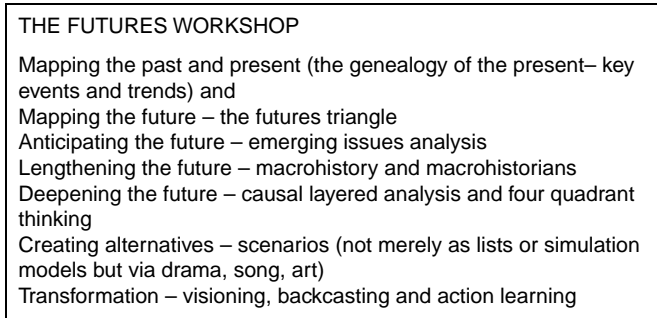


Fig. 3. The futures workshop.

Transformation is the last phase and it begins with visioning the future. There are different ways to vision the future. Visioning can be based on questioning,⁴ asking individuals what world they are living in, say, in 2020. What does work look like? What institutions are dominant? What does play look like? What is their identity? Or it can be meditative; this process requires participants to close their eyes and visually engage the future asking with their mind's eyes what they see, hear, feel. Finally, a list of attributes of the preferred future can be developed. Using questioning, creative visualization and lists allows the vision to be triangulated—checked from various ways of thinking.

From the vision, a backcast is developed and the future is remembered. The question asked is: what logically had to happen in the last 15 years for this 'today' to be achieved? Participants are asked to remember the future that was created (and is now the past). This memory serves to open up the capacity to change. Once the map is filled out, then a more current strategy can be developed. This strategy is best when based on the action learning model. In this model, other stakeholders (and their stories) are brought into the process. The goal is not yet another plan—but a process of change. This means experimentation, discerning what might work. Who will resist, who will lead the change? Who will watch the process? Who will need to be encouraged?

A futures workshop is one way to create transformation—this can be a day process or a two-day process, or even a half-day process (Fig. 3).

3. Main points

In this last section, based on reflections from case studies [2] using the MAMDCT futures workshops approach described [6], I illustrate five main points of anticipatory action learning. They are:

- Sensitivity to the social environment—the place, the changing social dynamics and the many ways of knowing and learning of participants. Understanding the intelligence of and in the environment; using intellectual, emotional and spiritual means in doing this is pivotal.
- Anticipatory action learning (AAL) can lead to uncomfortable areas of inquiry for the organization.
- AAL, like all approaches, can be cleverly appropriated by power, by official futures.

⁴ Developed by Zia Sardar, the editor of *Futures*.

- Resistance must be negotiated, named, acknowledge and considered part of the futures process, not an external dimension to be removed. And:
- The future is deepened by authentic understandings of the Other.

3.1. *Sensitivity to the social environment*

Sensitivity to the social environment is crucial in anticipatory action learning. Understanding the intelligence of the environment - using intellectual, emotional and spiritual means is pivotal. At a scenario futures workshop for a major multinational company in Australia, the focus of the day changed when we moved from the official discourse—workforce scenario planning—to the deeper reason why they were there. This was made possible by having a structure for the day (programmed knowledge) and clear methods to understand the future, but also by continuously negotiating the day, being sensitive to participants' changing needs. By noticing the changing dynamics, we were able to successfully move from the litany to the deeper allowing the real issues confronting them to emerge.

During the first part of the day, we swiftly moved through the mapping exercises. Indeed, they found these methods easy to use. They were clear about their strategy, which consisted of moving from a client focus to a candidate focus, and moving from work placement to broader life coaching.

What occurred in the section on deepening the future was more significant. Sensing that the real issue was the identity of the company, I asked about their metaphors of the future. Most were road/car metaphors—about races, with minor setbacks along the route, but eventually major victories. They were often in command, although one or two were passengers in an excellent airline (again a goal-directed metaphor with a clear beginning and departure). Most of the men ascribed to this story. However, when we discussed collective metaphors, the story of the hare and the tortoise was the most popular. It had the most currency. Directors felt that they were the hare, moving rapidly and leaving competitors behind. After some discussion, the issue of a hero's journey surfaced [2]. Female voices particularly moved the discussion in this new direction. Tennis star Andre Agassi was seen as a model, particularly because his game had improved after he left his 'hare' personality behind, matured and gained reflection on life (through marriage). This led to the issue of the company soul. It then became clear that the tortoise was crucial for the health of the company. Along with clear directions, the company needed time to reflect on its journey, and to integrate its soulful dimension with its profit dimension. This meant taking seriously the needs of employees to live more balanced lives—family, part time, life transitions [1].⁵ This also meant balancing the masculine and feminine dimensions of the organization. Once the story was pushed, it also became clear that ultimately the hare did not win the race.

From this discussion three scenarios emerged: (1) a balance and integration of hare and tortoise dimensions of the organization, (2) a turbo charged tortoise and (3) a reflective hare. The default scenario—the hare pushing forward and ignoring its reflective self was considered inappropriate, and implausible in light of the intervention of the futures workshop. They understood that if they stayed solely in the hare model—as the fastest—that they would lose in

⁵ Mt Eliza Centre for Executive Education, Melbourne Business College, in its annual survey of CEOs reports that life-work balance was the primary issue in 2003.

the long run (as in the real fable), so they had to transform themselves internally and recover the crucial dimensions of their company. In the backcasting session, events and trends that could lead to individual and company integration came to the forefront, and were fed into the company's action planning. The result was the beginning of not just a different organizational strategy, but organizational redirection at a deep level. Significantly, it also led to individuals rethinking their lives.

In a recent workshop with a CEOs from the Health sector,⁶ I had planned a presentation based on the model explored above—MAMDCT. However the questions participants immediately asked made it clear to me that they were not interested in a map of the future (the futures triangle method) or in anticipating the future (emerging issues analysis) but in questions of their identity—who were they—in the broad scheme of things. We thus switched to a historical discussion on the changing nature of medicine and the myths behind this. Using causal layered analysis, four quadrant mapping and scenarios, we were able to analyse where they were now, and what their possible futures were. This occurred by being sensitive to their questions—what they really wanted to focus on. Action learning and Futures Studies were both crucial in keeping the day vital and relevant.

A few years back, at a local government council, we focused on the futures of regulation. I had assumed that they wanted to think of futures in terms of new rules, institutions, thus we focused on changing trends and issues. However, this was not engaging the audience. During the break, there was an intervention where an award was given to the best cartoonist in the division. Over tea, this led to a discussion on imagery. The result was that the plan of the day was changed, and the workshop focus became images of the future. By focusing on their interest, the participants engaged in the workshop. A preferred vision and next steps forward that represented their concerns emerged.

However, anticipatory action learning can lead to dangers. And this is the second lesson.

3.2. The AAL process can be uncomfortable for the organization

Two case studies are crucial here. In a health futures workshop for a state office of a Commonwealth Department, visioning the future led to results that were quite different than anticipated. The CEO had—wisely, as it turned out—asked me not to focus on the preferred future. However by late afternoon, this was what everyone wanted to talk about. Attempts to divert the enthusiasm did not succeed. As the preferred future was articulated, it energized everyone in the room. They were excited and felt empowered. However, at the end of the session, another factor arose. They were employees of the state office of a Commonwealth Department. They were there to implement federal policy, not to create their own policy, as their own preferred vision spelled out (they wanted to focus on preventive health, for example). This was the reason the CEO did not want to explore preferred futures since she knew their locus of control was limited. Focusing on the vision while they were living in the jungle could only lead to resignation (emotional and/or leaving work). Thus, once questioning starts, it is not clear where it will end. Attempting to pre-empt its conclusion rarely works since the process has its own dynamic.

⁶ Queensland Divisions of General Practice, Mooloolaba, Queensland.

3.3. *However, AAL, like all approaches, can be cleverly appropriated*

Often what occurs is that organizations, aware of the potential disruption of futures thinking, pay lip service to future interventions. In two cases, the future had already been decided upon, and the futures workshop was used to give the semblance of participation. A university in New South Wales, Australia had asked me to deliver a lecture on the university's futures and to run a workshop for faculty on the same subject. I sensed things were not as they seemed when the Vice-Chancellor did not stay for the completion of the lecture. Later I found out that they had already engaged a senior Australian academic/administrator to legitimize making the cuts required by the planned restructuring. The futures thinking part—when disassociated from the cuts—was window dressing. If they had combined the two strategies (with leadership taking some cuts too), then creativity (how to move together) could have resulted from what was instead to prove a difficult time ahead.

At another university in New South Wales, the department that we were working with used futures in a similar way. I sensed this when during the session on emerging issues analysis, instead of issues appearing that would challenge the nature of the university, discussions spun off to encounters with extra-terrestrials. Later, I found that the Department Head had already made the important decisions. The futures workshop, it seems on reflection years later, was not an authentic desire by all there. Factionalization was already present, and the futures workshop entered this politicized arena. Thus there was resistance. My mistake was not to deal with the resistance, and I stayed with the methods, instead of including the resistance through different scenarios. Many years later, I stayed focused on the task at hand but as well let the different voices speak.

This is the fourth lesson.

3.4. *Handling resistance*

Resistance or fear or must be negotiated, named, acknowledged and considered part of the futures process, not an external dimension to be removed. At a recent course at a local government in Australia, participants were focused on the fear of losing their jobs because of anticipated budget cuts. Instead of fanciful scenarios, we used causal layered analysis to unpack the litany (fear of losing job), the system (budget cuts because of other priorities), the worldview (civil service/bureaucracy) and the myth/metaphor (lifetime job forever) of this pressing issue. Once fear was confronted, alternatives emerged (my real purpose, other jobs, budget advocacy, etc.) that could be pursued and new metaphors of work were explored. As well, this experience illustrated that AAL was not just about the conceptual future—sometimes far away—but about the near and dear issues.

Tension in the organization can also be personality based. In a one day project for a corporation with strong government links, the central factor was the underlying tension between the two vice-presidents. One found futures of little value and the other was a futures champion. During the four quadrant tool, two issues emerged as decisive. The first was that the organization saw itself like Cinderella, in search of a Prince. The Vice-President most resistant to futures (that it was too vague, not of immediate problem solving use) saw herself as a step-sister and indeed acted like a person scorned. She resisted the methods, and when she saw that others were engaged in the futures discourse, she attempted to sabotage by focusing on current strategic disputes. When the other participants resisted being drawn into these debates she persisted by trying to control the futures discourse. Our tack, as facilitators, was to include, acknowledge and

name (in this case, the inappropriate behavior) while keeping the process focused on the futures of the organization, including its inner stories, future.

The day's end was inconclusive, though the external and internal challenges to the organization were obvious. Later, the organization asked for an additional two day futures meeting in order to explore in depth the issues raised. This second workshop was to use CLA to explore the visions of external stakeholders as well as their own unknown, unknown issues.⁷

The most important lesson in AAL, however, is as follows.

3.5. The future is deepened by understanding the Other

Conventional futures—within the predictive discourse—considers the future out there, to be discovered. However, within the crucial futures realm, the future is differentiated, and different ideologies can have alternative and authentic positions. The future can be reclaimed and recreated.

This came out most clearly in a workshop/conference with a Federal Government body (the Australian Communications Authority), around the issue of increased attacks on the ACA website. The obvious solution was more firewalls, protective measures. The social and economic reasons were the nature of technology, generally allowing anonymity for hackers and the low costs attributed to hacking. Costs and technology made hacking possible. At the discourse level and the myth level, groups saw the issue quite differently. Some at the ACA saw this in clear good/evil terms. They represented the right and might of government, for whom hackers were evil villains, or spoiled children. Representatives from civil society, however, saw the hackers not as evil, but as bothersome, increasing their costs to maintain their computer systems. The hackers' view—it was deduced—was that they saw this as open space, virgin territory, and resented that government was regulating it. For them it was neither good nor evil, but the Frontier West, where it was not clear who were the outlaws. Hackers saw themselves as freedom fighters, anarchists, rebellious, desirous of a changed world.

Depending on the foundational myth of cyberspace, different strategies are required. Seeing the Other as evil leads to one variable technocratic solutions while seeing the Other as living a different story, leads to better understanding and the possibility of dialogue.

Finally one participant offered the notion that cyberspace was authentically the unknown—our current categories were of little use in understanding cyber-futures. Seeing hacking as good/evil or as the frontier forced all parties into impoverished strategies (i.e. sheriff versus outlaw). Openness was preferable, as meanings and identities were shifting.

This meeting did not lead to profound organizational nor institutional change; however, the layered approach ensured that the ACA scenarios developed with depth, and that the myth dimension so often lost in the technocratic discourse was valorized.

Depth need not just be conceptual. In a one day workshop on technology accessibility for Brisbane City Council, by the end of the day we had arrived at a shared vision, with clear steps as to who does what; in effect, a strategic plan. However, the sense in the room was: is this it? I noticed this and suggested that while we had finished, something was not quite right. This immediately led to a discussion that a formal plan was not crucial—indeed a formal plan could easily disappear into the bureaucracy—what was needed were real steps each person could take. The group then self-organized into subgroups with individuals taking responsibility to realize

⁷ This however was cancelled at a later date. We had named the resistance but local politics proved too difficult to change in one workshop.

the vision. As Jennifer Bartlett from Brisbane City Council, Office of Strategic Planning and Policy commented: “From having no vision and plan for technology accessibility, we now have multiple stakeholders all active in creating a future” [9]. The depth came from not pre-scripting the future, but allowing individuals to self-organize around issues they felt were critical. Merely developing a plan—however elegant it may have looked—would not have had stakeholder involvement, or the ‘microvita’ behind it—the lived desire for something else.

4. Anticipatory action learning—creating real alternatives

Essentially, anticipatory action learning is about this—creating real alternative futures through futures methods but very much in the context of the participants of the project. Doing so requires sensitivity to the social environment, to changing conditions, to how systems resist and appropriate innovation, and to how, through epistemological depth, this resistance can be transformed.

Futures thinking thus can certainly assist in individual change and in organizational change.⁸ Achieving this requires multiple factors including a sensitivity to the various stakeholders and their underlying worldviews; a champion who is committed to change; solid research that can provide evidence for the possibility of other futures; a citizen or employee visioning processes; and respect for the process.

A crucial factor is seeing futures not only as forecasting but as creating confidence in individuals’ and systems’ abilities to creatively adapt to new challenges. The anticipatory action learning dimension is decisive. By questioning the given future, alternative futures can be explored, and the preferred future has a greater probability of being realized. Anticipation thus becomes a vehicle to explore meaning instead of the push for gee-whiz discussions on technology. Ensuring the possibility of dissent, of continued agency and of the capacity to create desired futures, remains the crucial desire and hope of the future. Organizational, social, environmental, cultural and spiritual innovation is one of the most important potential contributions of Futures Studies.

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⁸ Indeed, writes Robert Burke: “One of the leading business school’s in the world, Mt Eliza Centre for Executive Education, Melbourne Business School, is using this approach in its own futures centre”. Dr. Burke is Program Director, Eliza Centre for Executive Education, Melbourne Business School.