

Futures Research QUARTERLY

Winter 1998, Volume 14, Number 4

In This Issue

Wayfinding to Benchmarks in 21st Century Health Practices

*by Dale R. Brown, Suzanne Pieklik, and Edward
Ponatoski*

Teaching Futures Workshops: Leadership, Ways of Knowing, and Institutional Politics

by Sohail Inayatullah

Towards a Group Mental Map of the Future— an Exploration

by Leong Wing Fatt and Chong Keng Choy

Transitional Cohorts in the Cycles of American History

by James Lihosit

Do We Need a Discipline Called Virtual Geography . . . to Help Understand the Separate Realities that are “Cultures?”

by Gabriel J. Cherem

Special Feature

Around the World: Setting a Precedent for Futures Conferencing

by Seth J. Itzkan

TEACHING FUTURES WORKSHOPS: LEADERSHIP, WAYS OF KNOWING, AND INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS

by

Sohail Inayatullah¹

This essay explores the tensions inherent in conducting foresight visioning workshops.² The challenge is to not only conduct the workshop in a technically efficient manner but also to be sensitive to the changing needs of participants, and to be cognisant of the institutional and cultural politics within which such a workshop is being held.

This challenge is even made more difficult by the nature of futures studies. In traditional disciplines, even as postmodernity "undoes" defining and organising narratives, there is a doxa—certain classic accepted texts that must be read—that must be adhered to. Futures studies does not have these boundaries. It is transdisciplinary, in search of an interpretive community. Its knowledge base just being defined,³ and who the futurists are is still in contention. Is futures studies a science or an appendage to strategic planning? Should futures studies be technical, concerned with forecasting; or cultural, concerned with recovering the future from the instrumental rationality of modernity? Or is futures studies primarily a movement, an attempt to keep futures pluralistic, less concerned with academic treatises and more with social action? Finally, should future studies be specific in its orientation, as in future generations research, which seeks to sustain and transform social conditions for the rights of future generations (humans, animals, plants, as well as metaphors or cultural lore)? While there have been many attempts to map the field,⁴ the field still has no hegemonic paradigm defining it. This makes teaching and communicating the future difficult. This is made more so in that "the future", nebulous as it is, is culture- and individual-bound. One direct experience of the problematic nature of the future was made apparent to me during a workshop for a national futures network. In the final session of the day long workshop, the task was to develop a shared vision of a preferred future. After more than an hour of discussion, we discovered that this was an impossible task. All fifteen board members could not agree on any shared vision or even a common language in which to discuss visions. Each understood the future differently and yet even without commonality, all somehow felt that it was fine to work with

Sohail Inayatullah holds a variety of positions, including fellow at the Communication Centre, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia and professor of Futures Studies, International Management Centres (Oxford Brookes and Southern Cross University).

and for the same futures association. Somehow this occurred either because the future was seen as a place void of content, so that they could quite easily work together, pretending they were colleagues or perhaps the future was such a broad ship that all could easily co-exist, even though their individual views of the future were dramatically different.

Finally, those who actively participate in teaching the future exist in global educative space (given the universality of the futures enterprise), as futures studies is one of the few global disciplines, living and flourishing outside of conventional national and international boundaries of State and knowledge. The how of teaching the future forces one into several academic, cultural, and historical frameworks simultaneously. This is enriching for practitioners, and also problematic, since all certainties are undone by the varieties of frames that create what it is that is taught and learned.

CASE STUDIES

Accordingly, conducting a successful foresight workshop is inherently difficult. In a day long visioning workshop for an Australian university, we found that the most important determinant in the workshop's success was our own uncertainty as to how to run the workshop. Deans, professors and administrators were initially resistant to participate in a visioning workshop. They feared that the workshop would be used by management to gain points over labor. They were also uncertain of the academic respectability of futures studies. Our⁵ first strategy was to ensure commitment from top management. Our second strategy was first to locate futures within macrohistory, within the large patterns of social and civilisational change. Our third strategy was to keep the workshop fluid, to constantly change directions as our perception of participants' needs changed. This fluidity on our part was central to allaying fears that we had a hidden agenda. The result was that since we were unsure of ourselves, the future ceased to be an authoritarian space, rather it became an open space that could be shared, where expert knowledge had not colonised alternatives. Academics afterwards agreed to continue the visioning process in their own branches.

Thus, while technically the workshop was problematic (nervousness, miscues, and, in general, a trial and error learning process), in terms of its outcomes—a shared vision, a shared backcast, and a shared strategy of transformation—as well as an openness towards the process of creating alternative futures, the workshop was highly successful. Central to this success was an opening speech by the university president in which he showed his commitment to the process as well as vigorous participation by hard-headed academics, once they saw that we were not there to “workshop” them, i.e. to con them.

In a workshop conducted at the same university for a particular

school, the results were opposite. While this workshop appeared to be technically perfect—speeches were crisp, all participated, and the workshop was owned by others—still we knew at the gut level that something was seriously flawed. This became evident in the visioning exercise, where a brainstorming exercise to derive emerging issues—wildcard events and trends that could dramatically alter the future—was received not as provocation but as silliness. Participants authentically did not believe the future would or could change. The school head had already hinted that she would not support what resulted from the workshop. Thus even though this workshop from our view as presenters was far more satisfying, the local culture of the group, which was far more concerned with the distribution of funds and office furniture, made the workshop problematic. Ultimately at the end of the workshop, while everything had been perfectly explained, overheads had been elegant and lectures well delivered, the workshop was an utter failure.

Many years earlier in a three-day conference that included all of an American state's judges, many attorneys, citizens' groups and private citizens, the lack of leadership follow-through led to a loss of motivation. The culmination of a ten-year futures research project was a Foresight Congress in which the visions and scenarios of participants were to be distilled into key recommendations. After listening to daily provocative speeches and engaging in scenario creation, by the third day, participants were ready to make specific recommendations. As organisers we had created a strong network of relationship with participants; we had also designed a process that would meet the needs of those that were strategic minded and those that were idealistic. Once the recommendations had been made and given to the Chief Justice, he was suddenly at a loss. His desire had been for consensus on transformation, or so it seemed. But once achieved, the actual thought of implementing the recommendations, of using the future for praxis, instead of merely for providing information on forecasts so as to increase the efficiency and efficacy of the planning and budgetary system, was far too difficult. The project was shelved. Years later, I edited a book from it, although the energy of transformation had now been lost. The inability of leadership to use the information for system change doomed further futures activities there. Again, the process had apparently been perfect. Many viewpoints had been represented, the actual visioning process was democratic, participants owned the results and thus were committed to seeing their futures realised. But in the face of leadership that *ultimately* merely desired a conference to show that it was officially doing something about problems, instead of actually doing something about them, the future as a site of transformation was a failure. More than the professionalism of the future, the politics of present leadership is a pivotal variable in determining the success or failure of a workshop.

In a presentation I conducted for a fast food corporation in an

American state, once again the actual information about the future was overshadowed by the cultural politics of the present. In my official presentation, I focused on trends in the fast food industry, opportunities in South-east Asia, as well as changing dietary patterns, particularly the move to vegetarian diets. While this data was well received, managers appeared to listen and it seems that from this data they would create new strategies. However, as the day progressed, I noticed that the crisis that the organisation was in, and thus their need for some type of outside consultant was not one that could be merely solved by having more information about the future.

Part of the organisation's challenge was choosing a new leadership to run it since the current leadership was aging. The person pegged to be the new leader made her presentation after mine. What was telling was that she wore a suit, made sure to put a podium between her and the audience and spoke in non-local English. As this corporation had succeeded because of its informal culture—shorts, jeans, t-shirts and localised English were standard—her behaviour seemed highly problematic. This incongruity was made more evident when during a small evening meeting of the consultants, the owners and the new leadership, I found out that she was intimately involved with the aged owner. I thus realised that scenarios and visioning, however well presented on my part, were quite useless methods in this situation. Unless of course, scenarios on corporate culture were developed and used to create a conversation as to what type of culture the organisation was to have and how best discord among management was to be handled. But it was too late for this, I had already told them to eat more tofu and the workshop was now over.

KNOWLEDGE AND WAYS OF KNOWING

Teaching futures studies or conducting futures workshops thus has numerous challenges. Not only can the process be derailed by local cultural concerns as in the fast food example or by leadership in the judiciary example or by petty concerns for office space and turf as in the university department example, equally challenging is creating pedagogies that meet the different ways humans know the world.

For example, Paul Wildman⁶ argues that there are at least five ways of knowing: (1) practical, technical knowledge; skills development; (2) scientific theoretical knowledge; knowledge to explain the world; (3) experiential knowledge to change myself or the world around me; (4) metaphorical knowledge or insight; deeper understanding of self and others (at heart and head level) and (5) relationship knowledge; knowledge so as to better relate to others, be they lovers, friends, God or the environment. A course or workshop thus must find methods and processes that meet these various ways of knowing. Those focused on relationship often prefer small group exercises, where they can share perspectives and directly learn from others.

Those concerned with metaphorical knowledge might prefer personal stories about how one has done futures studies or what one has learned from years of experience or conversations with elders and children. An experiential knowledge type would be far more concerned to ensure that the time spent at a workshop would help change the world—making a difference is far more important than the accumulation of information. Those focused on scientific knowledge might prefer technical descriptions of forecasting. Finally, individuals representative of the first knowledge cluster focused on practical knowledge might want to learn how to do the workshop themselves or would be engaged in a cognitive assessment to discern if these workshops could be applied to their day to day work.

For a presenter, the task then is certainly challenging. In a three-day workshop for a Third World audience who just one generation earlier had strong ties to the rural village, most of our strategies for gaining participation failed. They found our discussions on the future not relevant to their own needs—overly abstract. But once we switched tracks and asked them to talk about metaphors of the future (instead of general discussions on forecasting or visioning) within their own cultural framework and within their native language (often traditional sayings about the importance of foresight especially, but not limited to, agricultural practices), they could not stop. Finally, at 10 pm, we had to nearly force ourselves out of the conference room, begging them to go to sleep as well. The future had become suddenly accessible and thus deeply inviting.

One of the great strengths of futures studies then is its openness towards its self-definition. Futures studies fortunately has a rapidly evolving knowledge base. It is transdisciplinary. Having a leg in scientific analysis and a leg in cultural studies. This perhaps gives an advantage. Its lack of institutionalisation allows it to remain undomesticated. One can both be expert and student; one can lecture and can create spaces for participatory workshops. Whereas a traditional academic would need to feel that the lecture has to be perfect, for the futurist, there is more space for making mistakes, for laughter, for play, for experimentation and thus for authentic and successful pedagogy. Indeed, that the future is not immediate and thus of urgency, allows creativity to be explored. That the future is about alternative future and not fixed history, allows different interpretations, thus opening futures studies to more participation than one certainly might get at a history workshop.

Creating a successful workshop

Still, creating a successful workshop, even cognisant of the above cannot occur without the integrity of leadership. Without that one variable, even if one manages to ground futures in macrohistorical theories of social change (or in empirical social science, if that is the proclivity of the group); even if one takes an action learning

approach that is open to participants changing needs, and even if one carefully devises workshops and lectures to meet the needs of the different ways individuals and collectivities know the world—without integrity from leadership, the project will fail. Of course, this assumes that the presenter him or herself has integrity. If the participants of a workshop believe that the futurist is conning them either by pretending to know the future perfectly or by having a hidden political or economic agenda, then the project will come tumbling down.

Given the above, anyone for conducting a futures workshop?

NOTES

1. Dr. Sohail Inayatullah, the Communication Centre, Queensland University of Technology, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, 4001, Australia. Phone: 617-3899-5641. Fax: 617-3864-2252. Email: s.inayatullah@qut.edu.au. Inayatullah is co-editor of the *Journal of Futures Studies and Prout Annual*. He is also associate editor of *New Renaissance*. <http://www.others.com>; <http://worldfutures.com>; <http://www.ru.org>. Books being published in 1999 include: *The University in Transformation* (Praeger); *Islam, postmodernism and other futures* (Adamantine); *Transforming Communication* (Adamantine); *Situating Sarkar* (Gurukul) and *Transcending Boundaries* (Gurukul).

2. For more on futures workshops, see James Dator, "From Futures Workshops to Envisioning Alternative Futures," *Futures Research Quarterly* (Vol. 9, No. 3, 1993), pages 108-112. Also, Robert Jungk and Norbert Mullert, *Futures Workshops: How to Create Desirable Futures*. London, Institute for Social Inventions, 1987. And, Wendy Schultz, *Futures Fluency*. Doctoral Dissertation. Honolulu, Hawaii, Department of Political Science, 1995. Her chapter on methods appears in Sohail Inayatullah and Paul Wildman, *Futures Studies: Methods, Emerging Issues and Civilizational Visions—A Multi-Media Journey* (Brisbane, Prosperity Press, 1997) (On diskette and through the Web).

3. Through efforts such as Rick Slaughter, ed., *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies-Vols. 1-3*. Melbourne, DDM and Futures Study Centre, 1996. Volume 4 titled *Futurists: Visions, Methods and Stories* is forthcoming in 1998. See, also, Rick Slaughter, "The knowledge base of futures studies as an evolving process," *Futures* (Vol. 28, No. 9, November, 1996), 799-812.

4. The most recent effort is Graham H. May's *The Future is Ours*. (London, Adamantine, 1996) (See, in particular, his section on futures workshops, pages 194-199). Also, Wendell Bell's *The Foundations of Futures Studies*. Two Volumes. (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Transaction Publishers, 1997). And, George Thomas Kurian and Graham T.T. Molitor, *Encyclopedia of the Future*. Two Volumes. (New York, Macmillan Library Reference, 1996).

5. Working with Dr. Paul Wildman, Fellow in Futures Studies, International Management Centres, PacificRegion. Email: pwildman

@powerup.com.au

6. See Paul Wildman and Sohail Inayatullah, "Ways of Knowing, Culture, Communication and the Pedagogies of the Future," *Futures* (Vol. 28, No. 8, 1997), 723-740.