

Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas (1991, 2002)

Introduction to First Edition (1991)

Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas originally took two years to develop and produce. It was not intended as a teaching kit as such (though it has numerous uses in education) so much as a resource pack intended for the use of anyone wishing to understand or utilise some of the conceptual riches of the futures field.

While the public continues to equate futures with prediction, and while the high ground of futures work often seems to be associated with prestigious think-tanks, gee-whiz tv shows and the convocations of professional futurists, I have increasingly taken the view that the most broadly useful aspects of the field lie elsewhere. That is, in the potential of its conceptual resources to stimulate and enable certain crucial shifts of understanding and perception among wider populations. These shifts have to do with such things as our emergence from the triumphs and disasters of the industrial age, with developing longer-term views, with calling the bluff of machine-led notions of progress and with negotiating visions and views of futures worth living in. Futures concepts provide the foundations of a futures discourse, a basis for thinking and for acting. Properly understood, they facilitate a deeper human and cultural engagement with some of the key dilemmas and processes of the time. Many of the concepts presented here are structurally simple and readily understood. Yet the more I have worked with such notions as the 200-year present, the foresight principle, the architectural metaphor and so on, the more productive I have found them to be. This occurs because when the human mind actively engages with such material it makes meaning, draws out significance, explores new avenues and options. That, perhaps, is one of the central purposes of humanly-oriented futures work.

The book had its origins in some time diagrams I drew in the mid 1980s. Over a period of time, these were circulated, published, copied and re-drawn so that I began to see new versions coming back from widely-scattered sources. If, as Steward Brand has observed, 'information wants to be free' perhaps, in some sense, futures concepts also needed to be 'let loose.' My initial idea was to simply gather ten key concepts, to illustrate them graphically and publish them. A futures-related public-service organisation agreed to fund the print-run and, so I thought, that was that.

However, the deal fell through. How many worthy projects are lost in the gaps between changing administrations? Quite a few I suspect. So it was that the original material languished in a file drawer for over a year. I had neither the time nor energy to promote it; that is until I went to Budapest in 1990 for the 11th world conference of the World Futures Studies Federation.

Allen Tough, a Canadian colleague, had organised a session called *Cutting-Edge Ideas* and had invited a dozen or so people from around the world to put up some of their current material for wider consideration. Having been invited to participate, I felt that it might be useful to try to summarise some of the

central ideas from my work in critical futures study. So I travelled to the meeting equipped with a list of core ideas and a handful of overhead projector slides. The results were astonishing. Clearly there was more mileage in the ideas than I had realised. My handouts rapidly vanished. People asked for summaries of the material and copies of my OHP's. Thus was born *Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas*.

Once back in Melbourne, I determined to revive the idea and to work up the later sections into a more ambitious package. This I did. The 1991 edition included OHP blanks and an annotated bibliography of some 150 futures books. The package as a whole was, in part, aimed at upper secondary and tertiary educators, particularly those involved in the *Prep 21* project in the USA. However, as noted, it was also intended for other, non-teaching, uses. These included community groups, consultants, planners, writers and other creative artists, media people and even politicians. Since I wanted the material to be used as widely as possible, I relinquished copyright for all material originating with me for teaching, research and creative uses.

Finally, I would like to point out that I have in no way attempted to be objective or systematic about the selection or treatment of the material presented. This is a personal (and perhaps idiosyncratic) summary of ideas which I believe to be exciting and productive. I am happy to receive feedback both on the way I have handled these concepts as well as comment on others which, perhaps, I might also have included. Like its companion volume *Futures Tools and Techniques*, this is not an end product so much as part of a process. Later versions of the book will certainly be informed by users' comments. Naturally, I take full responsibility for errors, mistakes or other defects. I have not found it easy to fit this project in along with several others. But if it proves useful I shall be well pleased.

If, once again, some of the contents return after having circulated widely, the package will have achieved its purpose. The best possible result would be for some of the material here to become so commonplace that a publication of this kind would finally become redundant.

Richard A Slaughter,
School of Education
The University of Melbourne
Australia
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Introduction to Second Edition

Far from becoming redundant, the ideas in this book seem more pertinent in 1995 than they did in 1991. The world is no safer, short-term thinking is still the norm and futures studies are still too rarely taught in universities and schools.

The first edition certainly fulfilled my hopes. It was circulated widely and used in many different countries: by teachers, lecturers, graduate students and

many others. The feedback has been encouraging. The original 30 sections have therefore been expanded to 50. I have taught several futures courses and seen the responses of students at the under- and post-graduate level. Hence, there is no doubt at all in my mind about the value and appropriateness of what is offered here. This book is certainly my own, perhaps idiosyncratic, selection, but the resources I have drawn upon are collective. I am quite certain that they will be taken up and used more widely as we approach the new millennium and as some earlier ways of thinking and doing continue to decay.

In many ways the continuing omission of futures studies from the contemporary map of knowledge is a cultural oversight. This creates the familiar 'threshold problem.' That is, those who are unaware of what futures studies have to offer dismiss them out of hand or link them to a sterile notion of 'prediction.' *Yet once that threshold is crossed, a whole new world of insight, understanding and empowerment appears.* 'The future' far from being an empty space opens up and presents us with a wide range of options. Indeed, the more we become aware of futures concepts, ideas, principles etc., the more we see that the present is profoundly conditioned by the future. The old past-to-future progression is only part of the story. Increasingly we cannot understand the present without also understanding its future extensions and implications. This is partly why I have added a whole new section on *implementing foresight*. For, as time goes by, it becomes increasingly clear that a technically powerful culture which lacks foresight and does not truly aspire to a measure of wisdom, is signing its own death warrant - and that of uncountable others.

On the other hand there are many, many futures worth living in. Future generations cannot speak for themselves, but their very existence now hangs on what we do at the end of the 20th century. The point, after all, is not merely to learn from history, but to create it. The underlying purpose of futures studies is to assist in this process. I hope that in a modest way this new edition will help develop a futures discourse and, through it the clarity and motivation we so clearly need.

Richard A Slaughter
Futures Study Centre
Melbourne
Australia
January 1995

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