

Futures Thinking for Social Foresight

Introduction

Preface and Acknowledgements

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Futures Thinking for Social Foresight: Introduction

Preface and Acknowledgements

The origins of this book lie in two earlier works:

- *Futures Tools and Techniques, and*
- *Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas.*

The former drew on some key concepts that were initially explored in my PhD and then brought together for the first time in an 80-page booklet prepared for a short course held at the University of Lancaster, UK, in 1986.¹ The booklet was subsequently revised and expanded in 1998 and again in 2000. The latter originated in a session at a World Futures Studies Conference in Budapest in 1991 when, following a particularly well-received session, I was asked for more copies of overhead slides and their associated notes than I could reasonably supply. These were eventually collected together and published, with a range of related material, by the Futures Studies Center, Melbourne.

I always saw these books as the two halves of what I referred to as a ‘futures smorgasbord’. What I meant by that term was that, taken together, here was a variety of practical and conceptual starting points for futures understanding, enquiry and action. They were particularly suited to use in schools and, indeed, over the years many teachers around the world have taken sections of these books and woven them into teaching programs. For many years I have believed that the starting points for futures enquiry are really very straightforward and accessible. If we could resource teachers and schools with some of this material it would be much easier for children and young people to acquire the beginnings of a futures discourse. Ideally the latter would grow and develop over time and help to raise the level of futures literacy generally. That this has not yet happened on any wide scale is by no means a result of the paucity of the material or of the potential of futures studies, or applied foresight. Rather, it springs from the fact that the educational significance of futures thinking has still not been widely recognised, despite all the research and other evidence that clearly demonstrates its value.² Meanwhile, successive generations continue to inherit an ever more dangerously over-extended world filled both with new dimensions of hazard as well as quite new opportunities.³

As time went by, a further issue arose. I had moved on to other concerns (such as strategic foresight and integral futures) that took me far beyond my initial focus on education.⁴ As a result some (but by no means all) of the material in these books gradually became dated. From time to time I would think about ‘refreshing’ them, but I also felt that the results would be improved if a ‘fresh mind’ were to be involved. And there the matter rested for several years. A number of avenues were explored but each time they ended up leading nowhere.

I was close to abandoning the project when a colleague suggested that I contact Marcus Bussey. I’d known Marcus for some years, respected his work and even published some of it in a special issue of Futures.⁵ When I broached the subject with him it both appealed and also came at a time when he was able to fit it into his schedule. So in late 2004 we met, discussed the project, developed a modus operandi and started work.

I am delighted with the result. Marcus had a free hand to go through the original material, select what he considered the most valuable and also to add in new material that had become available in the interim. He

also sought out new textual and visual material. I am particularly grateful to his parents, Vic and Marjorie Bussey, for some excellent new line drawings produced especially for this publication.

I also want to thank Susan Leggett who inherited a manuscript with various loose ends and turned it into a polished and consistent product. Finally I want to thank Kuo-hua Chen and Chien-fu Chen, both from Tamkang University, Taiwan, for taking this project on its final stage. As well as publishing this English version they also undertook to produce a Chinese version.

I hope that this new, revised, edition will prove useful to a new generation of teachers around the world. They, in turn, will help their students locate their own sources of inspiration and power within the futures domain and, in so doing, develop futures understanding, literacy and capability to the new levels required by an ever more challenging world.

The title of the book, *Futures Thinking for Social Foresight*, suggests that, in coming to grips with the issues and themes presented here, the task of moving from societies that are driven by the past toward ‘unknown’ — but increasingly hazardous — futures can be made easier. The task for everyone is that of enhancing individual foresight and using this as a stepping stone to create social foresight.^{6, 7} The latter will become increasingly valuable as the stakes for human civilisation continue to grow.

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Notes

1. Slaughter, R. A. (1982), *Critical Futures Study and Curriculum Renewal*, PhD, University of Lancaster, UK.
2. Gidley, J., Bateman D., & Smith, C. (2004), *Futures in Education: Principles, Practice and Potential*, AFI Monograph 5, Swinburne, Melbourne.
3. Beck, U. (1999), *World Risk Society*, Polity Press, London.
4. Slaughter, R. A. (2004), *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight*, Routledge, London. Web: <http://www.foresightinternational.com.au>
5. Bussey, M. (2002), *From change to progress: critical spirituality and the futures of futures studies*, pp 303–316 in R. Slaughter (ed.), *Futures of Futures Studies*, special issue of *Futures*, 34(3 and 4), Elsevier, Oxford, UK.
6. Australian Foresight Institute, (various authors) *Monograph Series 1–10, 2003-2005*. For more information on the monographs see: <http://www.swin.edu.au/agse/courses/foresight/index.htm>
7. For information on social foresight see: <http://www.foresightinternational.com.au>

How to use this disc

This publication seeks to both provide teachers and students with an overview of futures studies while also acting as a source for teachers and others looking for activities and material that will help to develop futures literacy in their students. The long term goal is that of creating social foresight. To these ends it offers a tapestry of sections that weave patterns via abstract thought and practical action.

Readers who work through the text in a linear fashion will experience the field of futures studies unfolding before them. Users can also ‘dip into’ the text at any point. The latter is as uncluttered and free of jargon as we could make it. At the same time a capacity for deep reflection will certainly assist a fuller understanding of the richness of the material presented here. It has been extensively trialled and tested over an extended period. We have inserted a series of reflections into the text. These sections deal with some of the deeper concepts and insights that underpin the practice of futures. They can be returned to throughout the book as the reader’s understanding deepens.

For the experienced futures educator the text is a source of material designed for tutorials and classroom settings. Most sections come with questions and activities but are open ended enough for creative engagement on the part of teachers and students. This openness is central to futures thinking. Furthermore, for this material to be effective it needs to be ‘owned’. This ownership is activated through engaging with the material and using it creatively in specific learning contexts.

Introduction

Futures studies (FS) is a fairly new and certainly an exciting development in the human and social sciences. This text is a synthesis of some of the most useful features of this new practice for teachers, students and practitioners. It is designed to offer a way through the forest of futures practice. Through this journey the aim is to develop a range of futures literacies and methods which, when assembled, generate futures thinking and activate social foresight. We also hope that these materials will help empower users to design their own self-actualising pathways out of the industrial era.

At the outset it helps to view the terrain over which the reader will travel. FS is a practical activity grounded in a set of values as broad as its interests. As a practice, it consists of a range of techniques and methods that enhance the user’s own foresight capacities (among others) and raise them to new levels. At the same time FS enables us to both think about, and respond to, the future more freely than perhaps any other academic or applied discipline. As such, FS draws both on exterior and interior capacities, and the latter are a key focus of this text.

Conventional futures work tends to emphasise pragmatic, empirical and strategic concerns. We attempt to balance this by also exploring concepts and processes that engage people’s symbolic and cultural capacities – their ability to make, and re-make, meaning. The use of these capacities helps to facilitate deeper, more creative and inclusive responses. This approach builds on the integral awareness that individuals, and the societies they inhabit, are mediated by dynamic contested fields in which external forces such as policy, technology and economics are mediated by equally powerful internal processes relating to ideology, world view, desire, fear and hope.

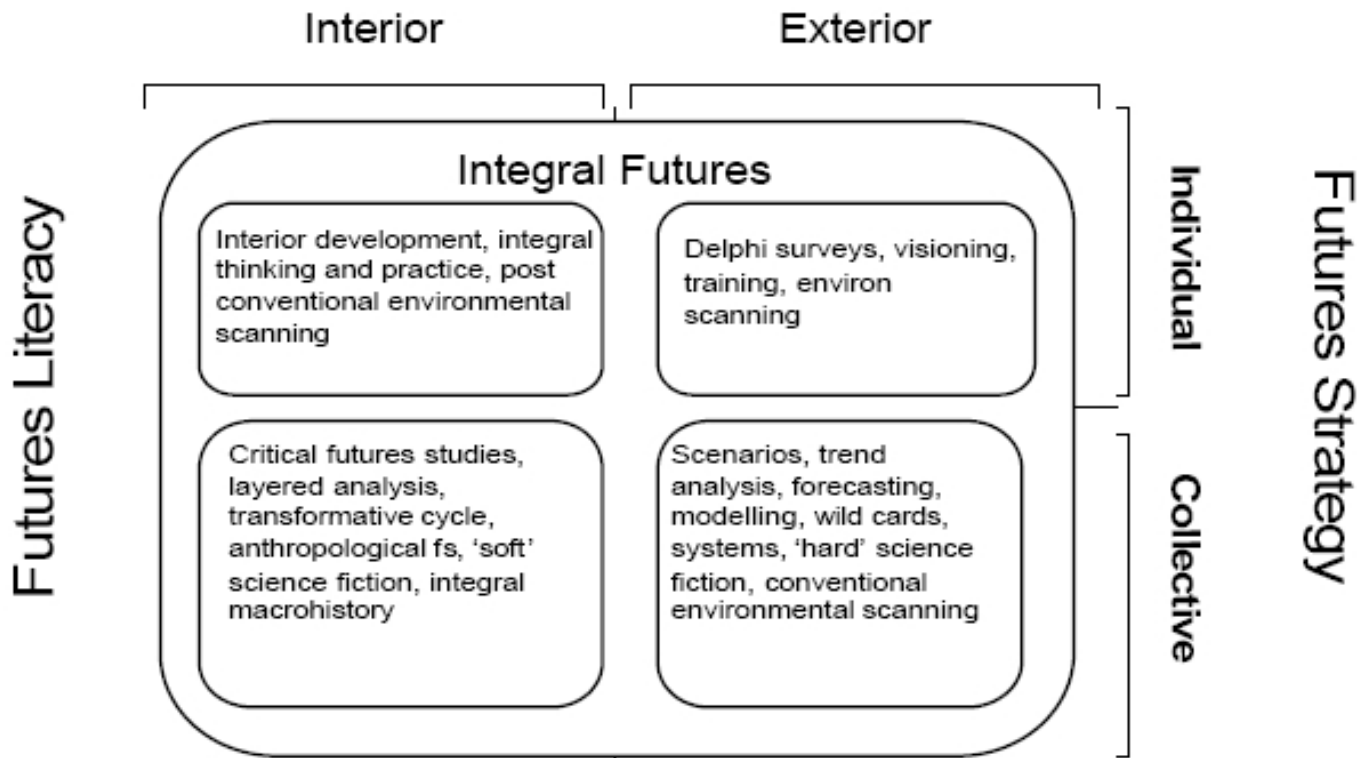


Figure 1.1 Literacy, strategy and methodologies

Figure 1.1 summarises some aspects of this approach, and figure 1.2 shows one way of illustrating how each area folds one into the other in a constantly turning integral loop. This process offers us new insights into how the social and individual worlds are constructed, maintained and transformed. Futures literacy refers to the development of values, attitudes and concepts that allow us to reflect and act beyond habit and fear. Social foresight, working in the external strategic field of futures, is anchored in these literacies and their application to present dilemmas. The following sections also offer many practical examples that provide ‘anchors in reality’ for teachers and students alike.

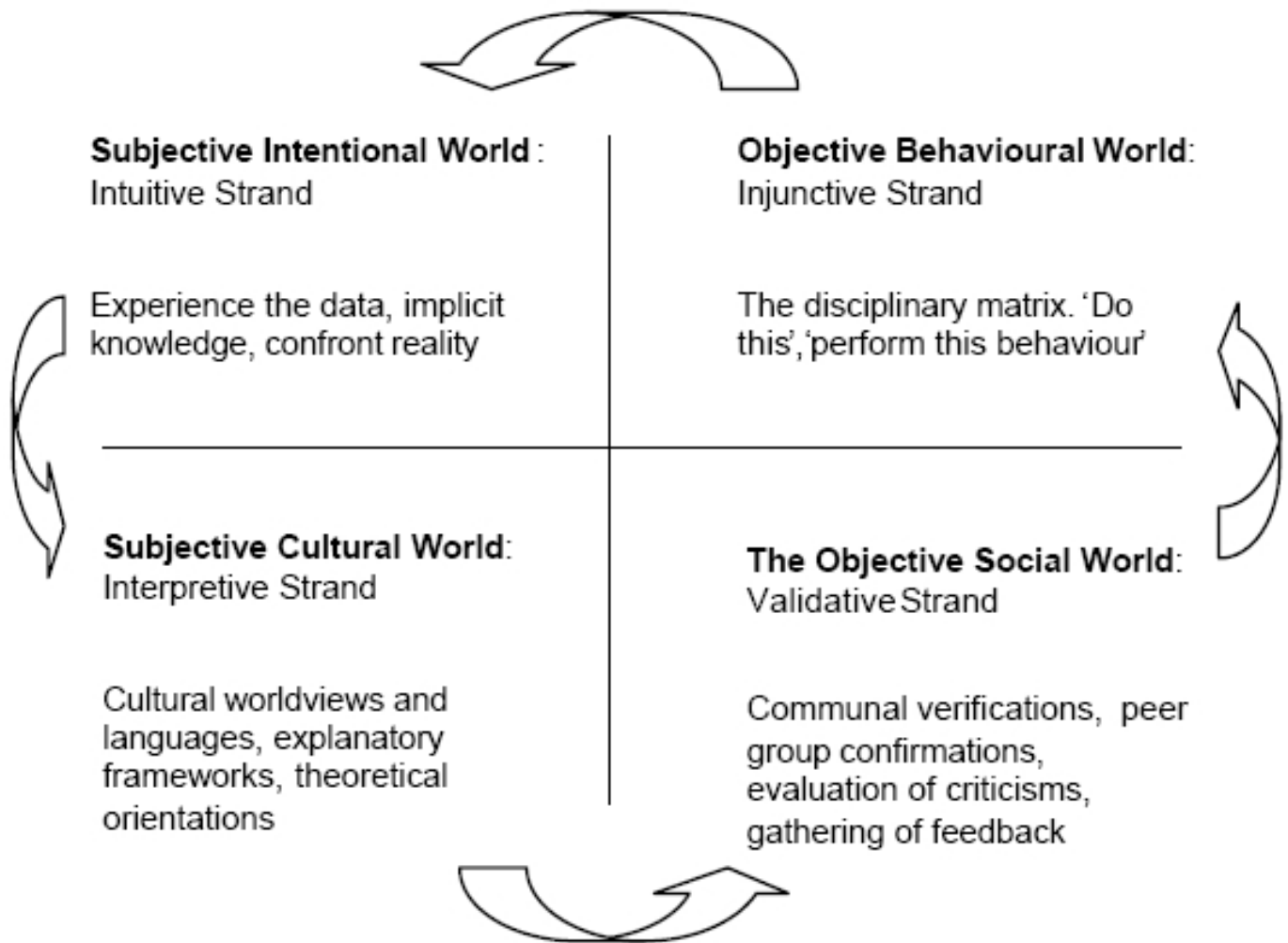


Figure 1.2 An integral cycle of knowledge

Effective futures work engages both the external and internal dimensions of the integral loop. This text offers a range of tools, concepts and processes that, when internalised and applied, nourish futures literacy. The latter is a necessary precursor to social foresight and, together, they constitute the twin poles of applied futures.