

Ryota Ono Interviews Richard Slaughter for a Research Paper on Futurists in Australia*

What paths and/or key events have brought you where you are and to what you are doing in relation to the futures field?

- I was attracted to science fiction when I was a teenager. Eventually, I realised that the images of the future appearing in science fiction were mostly negative.
- The question arose was ‘Why is the collective image of the future so depressing?. Also ‘why does future have to appear so dark?’
- From 1969 to 1975, I lived in Bermuda. I realised that I was living in a microcosm of the global system. An unintended experiment was going on to see to what extent 20th Century growth pressures could be accommodated in an isolated twenty square mile area island group.
- What I saw was that the unique qualities of Bermuda that made it a holiday destination were being overwhelmed by the tremendous pace of development (roads, houses, hospitals, golf courses, schools, etc.). Realising that these trends reflected what was happening internationally, I began to sense some of the reasons why the wider future might not be what most people desired.
- Before going to Bermuda, while I was being trained as a teacher, I came across a book called *A Runaway World?* (Leach, E., BBC, 1968). It suggested that dominant trends in the world would lead to a disaster unless they could be addressed and turned around. I found it odd that all these active processes were going on, some of which were really dangerous, but not once did they appear in the curriculum considered suitable for teachers in training.
- A combination of reading science fiction, of experiencing what was happening in Bermuda and of reading *A Runaway World?* alerted me to the fact that a whole series of changes was going on. When I got back to UK I was admitted to the School of Independent Studies at Lancaster University. This allowed me to help create the design for my degree. I ended up getting first class honor’s degree for a program called *Science, Technology and the Human Future* (1975-78). By the time I’d finished my degree, I had some awareness that there was a field of futures and that there were organisations such as the World Future Society and the World Futures Studies Federation. They appealed to me in part because they identified issues that few others seemed to address.
- Fortunately I had some very good supervisors at Lancaster (including Brian Wynn, Jane Routh and especially John Reynolds). These people made it possible for me to proceed on to a Ph.D (*Critical Futures Study and Curriculum Renewal*, 1978-82).
- In 1980, I attended at *The First Global Conference on the Future* in Toronto. I went to a pre-conference seminar on *Teaching Futures* and started meeting people who had actually been teaching futures. They had hands-on experience, which was virtually unknown in the UK or Europe at that time. I began connect with practitioners and opinion leaders in the field beyond the literature per se. I started to meet more people at conferences. The more I got to know, the more I was able to map the field and eventually to find my own place within it.

- I was very fortunate in getting a post-doc fellowship for two years (1983-85). It enabled me to write the first draft of *Futures Tools and Techniques* (Lancaster University, 1985). That draft eventually became evolved into a later book called *Futures Thinking for Social Foresight* (Slaughter, R. with Bussey, M. Tamkang University, Taiwan, 2005).
- In 1986 an invitation came from Australia to address a conference called *Futures in Education*. I flew there and found that an organisation called the Commission for the Future hosted the conference. On return visits I worked with the CFF on a number of projects.
- But a career in futures was very slow to emerge. It led me to suggest to people who are thinking of studying futures ‘Be prepared to have an uncomfortable ride. You cannot guarantee getting sustaining work quickly or easily. It is still early days.’
- Eventually a job did come up in the Institute of Education at University of Melbourne. I took up a position as lecture in Social Education and Futures that lasted for five years (1989-94).
- It led to a very satisfying period of growth and development. I was supported by colleagues and Prof. Hedley Beare (with whom I co-wrote *Education for the Twenty First Century*, London, Routledge, 1993). The work I did there was of interest to many people. I soon was receiving invitations from schools, principles’ associations, even the education bureaucracy. I travelled all over the country and internationally as well. Clearly there was something that caught peoples’ imagination about futures *in* education (rather than the future *of* education).
- But the university system mostly sidelined the issue and it proved difficult to get any permanent innovation or change.
- That was proved again when a proposal to create a specifically futures-oriented curriculum called *Futures, Personal, Social, Global* for year 11 and 12 students in Queensland was accepted. I then worked intensively with a Queensland based team to put a curriculum together. I was appointed chair of the development committee for the Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (B4S) for 18 months. I recall clearly that the draft proposal was unanimously passed by the B4S curriculum committee. It was clearly the view and intent of the profession at that time that this innovation was valuable and would be implemented.
- Unfortunately what was then happened was that when a re-organisation occurred, those directing the system just let the proposal die.
- Until 1999 (when I was invited to set up the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne) that pretty much summed up my experience working with futures in education in Australia. Even when stakeholders (students, teachers, principle, research institutes) have strong interests in futures in education, the system itself simply cannot manage to bring it on board. It prefers topics such as creativity and innovation. (Note: in 2015 these, too, have suffered from being temporary concerns and are no longer thriving.)
- I was profoundly disappointed at losing the job at the University of Melbourne since the work I started there was discontinued. There was a real demand for it and it was successful, but the university had other priorities.

- I did, however, decide that it was time to undertake some serious personal development work which, over time, helped to provide the clarity and confidence that I needed.
- I went to a week-long workshop in Gippsland that invited participants to know themselves on a deeper level than they had done previously and to get a sense of their genuine underlying purpose and capacity in life. That was just so clarifyingly helpful for me. I became aware of a new sense of my own ability to transcend disappointment and get over it.
- Not long before leaving the university, I sent out perhaps 120 letters to people around the world to people asking for contributions to *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (KBFS), on which I was then working. I put a lot of energy on this project which first appeared as a special issue of *Futures*. The strong and unambiguous feedback I received encouraged me to continue the project. The first hard copy edition of the KBFS was published and launched at a WFS meeting in Washington DC. (Slaughter, R. Ed. *Futures Study Centre & DDM Media*, Melbourne, 1996.)
- One implication of these experiences for others is that when you run into difficulties, opposition and disinterest; or when you are dismissed or sidelined, you just have to change what you are doing in some way and find other ways to moving forward. That was exactly what happened.
- Some years later, in 1998, long after I'd learned how to flourish outside of institutions an unexpected opportunity arose. It occurred during a meeting of an international advisory board with the Vice-Chancellor of Swinburne University of Technology. A participant asked the VC how the university was planning to deal with future challenges. He had not given it much thought. A friend of mine who was at the meeting heard the comment and mentioned my work. As a result, the university commissioned us to write a proposal for a Foresight Institute at Swinburne. The proposal was accepted. The university decided to go ahead and invited me to be the first director. I started work there in August 1999 and we welcomed the first students during mid- 2000.
- I ran the program very successfully for five years. Then, in 2004, the original VC who had supported the whole program retired and a new one took over. It was clear from the outset that he did not just 'get' Futures or Foresight. So in mid 2004 I decided I'd had enough. So I resigned and handed the program over to others. At my farewell 'do' I suggested that this was not 'the beginning of the end' but merely 'the end of the beginning.' (And so it turned out. The program not only continues to this day but has expanded to undergraduate teaching as well.)
- Then early in May 2009 a newspaper report appeared with comments from the then Australian Chief Scientist. She described foresight as *the* most important aspect of science policy. This is one of many signals I've noted which shows that the notion of Foresight as a discipline is absolutely spot on. The idea and the reality of high quality professional foresight was and is right. Yet two universities I'd worked in that had had the opportunity to build, support and benefit from this area simply missed it due to different priorities. I still think that was a shame - not only for me personally but for the wider country and society.
- So, in summary, to be a futurist is to have certain satisfactions but also the disappointment that things you believe are vital and necessary are not necessarily taken up and applied.

Where have you seen any signs indicating either greater or less interest in thinking about the future?

- I see lots of interest in futures everywhere. It's paradoxical that most educated people are keenly aware of the issues of the future that are already around us - global warming, peak oil, ecological issues etc. - but they often tend to fall into the too-hard basket.
- Expressions of futures interest are everywhere. But there's very little disciplined interest and very little sustained support for advanced futures inquiry. I'm particularly disappointed with the university system in that regard, because it could do so much more.
- The business world is far more attuned to macro changes and to futures than government, simply because they live in a competitive environment and they have to think ahead (i.e. be strategic, know where to direct their resources etc.) which is simply part of what they do. So futures thinking is part of being in business. That's why many of them employ it. But a serious drawback, in my opinion, is that most of them don't do it very well. They prefer, on the whole, a much more conservative take on what 'futures' are about. This is really dictated by their own mental filters, their own specific interests and priorities. So their main focus is to know something about what the future holds so they can profit from it. Having insights into the future means that they they can design products and compete better for market share.
- Some good work has been done in the corporate sector (scenarios for example) and with corporate funding in certain limited ways. But on the whole, most futures work in business and industry is focused too narrowly on the interests of the firm and its 'bottom line' economic indicators.

What have you been trying to achieve in your individual and/or organisational work? Why and how?

- My underlying interest is always to grow the field and to see it developed to become a successful and dynamic part of how societies and organisations work and how people live. Everything I do focuses on building the field. And to that end, I do a number of things.
- First, writing is always a key part of what I do. In that way, I hope to help build the intellectual capital of the field. For example, several of my journal articles provided seeds of later projects or books. *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, *The Foresight Principle* and *Futures Beyond Dystopia* started as short papers published in *Futures* and ended up as books (or in the case of the KBFS a series of books).
- Second, I take seriously the idea of mentoring younger students, new entrants to the field. I think it critical that an intergenerational process occurs both here and with overseas contacts.
- Third, I want to help facilitate emergence of high quality futures literature. After the first edition of the KBFS, I continued to produce a series of refreshed versions, most of them on CD-ROM. I am currently thinking of how it could

possibly be made available online. The purpose of doing this is to support the programs around the world to help give them a common jumping off point or a way into the future. KBFS is not meant to be a Encyclopedia, but an introduction. It has been called a ‘one stop shop.’

- Fourth, I work to support the next generations of Foresight practitioners in Australia. The Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) certainly managed to initiate that process successfully. As the result of this program, there are now many more people around who are capable of doing high quality futures work.
- Finally we have commissioned a brand new Foresight International website that will contain a lot of material I hope people will find useful.

Can you assess your own work?

- Yes, anyone can do that. You look at objective data such as how many publications, how many citations and how many programs created or organisations assisted. It runs to awards, professional recognition and general standing in the field...

Can you share with me the most successful cases and your thoughts on what made them so successful?

- I'd pick out the AFI, the KBFS and Integral Futures. We made KBFS a metaphorical foundation stone for the AFI program (because it is international, multi-cultural and represents not merely some of the early ‘legends of the field’ but also the voices of new entrants). I am grateful for having that chance, because my life would have been harder if the opportunity had not arisen. That is, we were provided with the chance to achieve what business people call ‘proof of concept’ – proof that ‘strategic foresight’ has value; proof of the real potential of high quality applied futures work in a wide range of environments... The development, recognition and wide uptake of Integral Futures is also a part of the enduring legacy of that time and place.

Is there anything that you wish to happen externally?

- What I would like to see is that school systems, for the first time, let the awareness grow that we are creating disastrous futures and that today’s kids are likely to suffer. School systems must stop avoiding the global problematique and what it means for coming generations who won’t have much choice in the matter – they’ll have to deal with it. But the longer it takes the harder and more costly this will become.
- Reframe all educational processes from primary school to post-grad in that awareness. That is not to say that you create a lot of subjects with ‘Futures’ in the title. That may or may not be appropriate. But, rather, bring the awareness of what Futures (as a discipline) has to offer and contribute to educational structures, job descriptions and the curriculum.

- Specifically, I would like to see universities dedicate a substantial part of their money, personnel, resources, buildings and teaching programs to thoroughly reviewing the global problematique in all its aspects. I would also like to see them commit themselves to a serious program of international collaborative innovations focused on that.
- Another thing I would like to see is a move away from high growth, high impact, consumer-oriented societies to ones that adopt a widespread stewardship ethic. This takes the view that a core purpose of human beings and societies is to look after, to use wisely and pass on our world to future generations in a condition that is no worse than that which we inherited. We need to renegotiate our relationship with the natural world that supports us every minute, every day.
- With those two projects running together as mainstream social concerns, we would have a phenomenally rich cultural revolution and a real prospect of positive futures.

Is there anything that you would like to obtain within yourself?

- To never stop in my quest for clarity. I think clarity about complex issues saves us from despair and inaction. For me, the search for clarity is a central purpose that leads on to genuine empowerment and purposive action. It is connected with transcending ego in all its many guises.

Is there anything you would like to add?

- I might just say a brief word about having a critical attitude in futures. It's always been important for me to have a critical attitude - to give and receive critique. This attitude and the practices that go with it are sometimes misunderstood – which is probably unavoidable.
- People mistake critique as criticism. Yet I find that I learn more from people who disagree with me than those who passively agree. Criticism can be negative and hard to hear. Critique, on the other hand, has more to do with taking the time and effort to understand something in depth; also developing and sharing some of the deeper views that then emerge.
- I focus on ideas, artifacts and words and, in general, respect the people who produce them.
- For me critique is a central futures method and process. My work has been improved by critique from others. I see it an essential part of helping to build a mature and rich field. It is important to get out of ego and to keep the evolution of ideas and progressive practices going.

* This interview was conducted on the 29th of May, 2009 and contributed to the research paper *Futurists in Australia* by Ryota Ono, published in the *Journal of Futures Studies* Vol 15, No 2, 2010 pp. 115-132.