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VSI Richard Slaughter Title Page
Deepening futures methods to face the civilisational crisis
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Meredith is strategic foresight practitioner and psychologist with over 20 years of professional experience in the public and private sectors, including small business, education, health and disability.

Meredith has had many roles including psychologist, manager, team leader, strategy developer, leadership coach, facilitator and consultant. Meredith is passionate about helping individuals and organisations to find ways forward in complex and ambiguous times. Meredith offers individuals and organisations a bigger perspective and intellectual curiosity.

Meredith has designed and facilitated a number of workshops and programs, internal and external, about leadership and strategic foresight.

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Highlights

- We face a ‘civilisational challenge’
- Richard Slaughter suggests we can use futures methods and strategies to respond to this emergency
- Richard Slaughter considers how futures methods and strategies need to be deepened
- Richard Slaughter was instrumental in developing social foresight in Australia through the establishment of the Australian Foresight Institute and postgraduate studies
- The foresight field in Australia needs to obtain social and professional legitimation

Abstract

Richard Slaughter has argued for many years that we face a 'civilisational crisis', particularly in the context of climate change and the environment. Slaughter felt that traditional futures methods were too superficial and lacking in depth to address the civilisational challenge ahead of us. He provided frameworks and concepts to deepen futures methods and strategies and to build social foresight capacity. His significant practical contribution was the establishment of the Australian Foresight Institute and postgraduate studies at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. It is suggested that the foresight field in Australia needs to reestablish supportive structures such as these and take steps to obtain social and professional legitimation in order to promote an advanced futures discourse to take us toward better futures.

Keywords: futures; methods; foresight; professionalisation

Introduction

As the sun finally sets on 2020, it is becoming increasingly hard to deny that we face a 'civilisational crisis'. The emergence of coronavirus as a global pandemic, and its trajectory, is a symptom of a problem deep within our systems, a sign that the way we have been living is fundamentally flawed. Richard Slaughter has long been concerned about the civilisational crisis, however he felt traditional futures concepts, tools and methodologies, while useful and relevant in the context of organisational strategy, were too superficial and lacking in sufficient depth to help humanity to comprehend the predicament it is in and take action towards a better future. Slaughter played a significant role in the journey to futures disciplinary maturity by critiquing the dominant methodological paradigm and deepening futures enquiry to meet the global challenge. He was also pivotal in establishing formal structures, such as the Australian Foresight Institute and postgraduate studies at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, to support the development of the field and social foresight in Australia.

Futures studies and the civilisational challenge

Slaughter asserted that humanity has created a 'global emergency' for itself "through its careless expansion and colonisation of the Earth" (Slaughter, 2012). The 'civilisational challenge' is then "to comprehend clearly the historical predicament humanity is now in and to respond to it, not superficially, but with clarity, depth and commitment" (Slaughter, 1999c). Slaughter believed that futures studies methods could be moved beyond their "origins in the post-war US in the form of war games and strategic analysis" (Slaughter, 2020) and applied to the 'civilisational challenge'. However he felt methodological renewal was required to deepen traditional futures approaches in order to successfully deal with "the deeply-embedded cultural and human dilemmas" (Slaughter, 2002a) that humanity faces.

The framework provided by Slaughter to understand how futures work could be deepened to meet the civilisational challenge included four levels of futures enquiry, each going deeper and providing better insights. He said futures work should "ideally have some of the features of each of the levels of enquiry" (Slaughter 2002b). At the most superficial level is 'pop futurism' which is "largely bereft of theory or insight" (Slaughter, 2002b). The next level, 'problem-oriented futures work', is more practical and is the "central arena of mainstream futures activity" (Slaughter, 2002b). Slaughter stated that while this work has value in the world of organisational strategy, the 'global predicament' requires professional futures tools and methodologies to 'go deeper' than problem-oriented approaches (Slaughter, 2002a).

The third level, 'critical futures studies' (CFS), involves going beneath the surface into the area of beliefs, values and worldviews in order to "discern the grounds of new, or renewed, options" (Slaughter, 1999a). CFS emerged partly from Slaughter's PhD thesis written in 1982 in which he explored the relationship between futures studies and education, and discovered that the ideas, tools and methods available at the time were not powerful enough to propose change in "anything so protean and set in place as an education system" (Slaughter, 2002a). The final level, 'epistemological futures studies', goes even deeper and "helps to unfreeze the everyday life that we take for granted and to identify new sources of freedom, new ways ahead" (Slaughter, 1999a). Slaughter argued that futures work at the critical and epistemological level are

essential in order to “engage with the problematics of cultures in change and transformation” (Slaughter, 2002b).

Operating from the perspective that our external reality is a social construction based on beliefs and worldviews (Slaughter, 2002a), Slaughter argued that the futures studies methods needed to focus on the inner world of individuals and societies. He believed that the ‘defective’ Western industrial worldview has contributed to the global predicament and that we are on our current path because “humans have construed their world in particular ways for millennia” (Slaughter, 1999c). Slaughter argued that “viable futures for humankind cannot be created from pre-industrial, industrial or post-industrial models” and that what is needed is “likely to be fundamentally a post-materialistic one which embraces stewardship and the needs of future generations” (Slaughter, 1999c).

Attending to the inner world of people and societies is critical for meeting the civilisational challenge, as “the ‘inner’ world appears to precede and underpin the ‘outer’ one” (Slaughter, 2002a). Despite the importance of the inner world and the role of worldviews in creating our reality, Slaughter observed that both seem to have been overlooked by mainstream futurists. He said that foresight practitioners’ understanding of the importance of the inner world and applying it was “a significant step toward disciplinary maturity” (Slaughter, 2002a).

Slaughter critiqued the dominant “American mainstream empirical tradition” and its key methodologies. He observed that futures work had focused on understanding the external world of trends and drivers of change but had largely overlooked the internal world of beliefs, worldviews and attitudes, which is a powerful source of change (Slaughter, 1999a). He presented the case that traditional methods such as megatrend analysis and reports (Slaughter, 1993b) and environmental scanning (Slaughter, 1999a) overlook deeper realities and need to take a richer view. He felt that scenarios as a methodology for dealing with the civilisational crisis is problematic as they also lack depth, stating they “skate prettily enough around the surface but fail to deal in depth with the problematics of people, organisations, cultures in stress and transformation” (Slaughter, 2002a). He quoted Beck that scenarios will be “useless and even dangerous” unless they “deal with the realities of the interiors” of participants and practitioners.

In order to incorporate a focus on the ‘inner world’ at both an individual and societal level, Slaughter recommended applying Wilber’s ‘four quadrant’ model to futures work, saying it “enabled deeper, broader understandings of different aspects of the world, including the active, shaping roles of people and cultures” (Slaughter, 2020). According to Slaughter, mainstream futures work focused mainly on the right-hand quadrants of the external world of the individual (upper right) and the collective (lower right). He argued that critical and epistemological futures studies apply primarily to the left-hand quadrants of the ‘inner world’. In the upper left quadrant, critical futures studies considers the ways individuals interpret their world and in the lower left quadrant it deals with the social construction of reality (Slaughter, 1999a). Epistemological futures work deepens both.

Slaughter stated “the lack of a futures discourse in society is one of the structural impediments to change” (Slaughter, 1996b). He argued that rather than using

relatively superficial methods, advanced futures discourse would be a “powerful key to the mainstream emergence of growth of human awareness across the planet” (Slaughter, 1999c) and would enable societies to develop the ability to respond to the emerging near-future. He believed ‘positive dissent’ can reveal and explore new personal and social options that “lie beyond the purview of the mainstream” while also employing and encouraging “other values, other frameworks of meaning, other ways of knowing” (Slaughter, 1999c). He said that one area from which tools and methods of dissenting futures could be derived is critical futures studies (Slaughter, 1999c).

To generate a new social worldview, one which considers the natural world and future generations, Slaughter aimed to shift foresight from being a “largely undeveloped” individual human capacity to a social capacity. He argued that futures methodologies, tools and concepts “have an essential role to play” in this shift (Slaughter, 1996b). However he raised the concern that many futures tools and methods that have evolved to explore the emerging future are “largely for ‘insiders’” (Slaughter, 1997) and he considered how the future could be demystified so as to make future studies “useful and accessible to non-specialists”. He suggested ‘near-future landscapes’ (Slaughter, 1997) as a way of representing views of the near future in ways that non-specialists can understand through using visual images to highlight basic choices and to represent the results of exploring the near term future. In addition to generating a new worldview, Slaughter believed that through developing ‘social foresight’ humankind could understand the predicament it is in and find ways of dealing with it.

Development of social foresight in Australia

Slaughter (1996) outlined how futures studies could be progressively developed through five layers to meet the challenges of the 21st century. He argued that, at an individual level, humans have an innate capacity for foresight and have the ability to take a forward view and act responsibly with regard to long-term considerations. However most people raised in western cultures are “likely to be imbued with the characteristic Western outlook” (Slaughter, 1996b) that perpetuates an unsustainable world order at a fundamental level. Slaughter argued that this could be addressed at the second level through the development of a personal futures discourse founded on critical thinking and enabled by futures concepts.

Discourse alone cannot deal with complex future concerns, so the third level introduces futures methodologies and tools to “generate, manipulate and evaluate information about the future” (Slaughter, 1996b). The fourth level involves providing a supportive context for futures methodologies and tools through the “provision of an institutional or organizational milieu where high-level futures work can thrive, develop, be critiqued and implemented” (Slaughter 1996b). Slaughter provided a range of examples including embedding critical futures study in postgraduate university courses and the establishment of “institutions of foresight”. He argued that these institutes are important as they “initiate and support the crucial shifts of perception, policy and practice” that are required for global cultural change (Slaughter, 1999b). The final level is the social capacity for foresight in which social institutions, including government, business, education and commerce, take up futures concepts, methodologies and tools. According to Slaughter’s vision, a foresight culture emerges that thinks long-term and the human race is able to grasp the

predicament it is in and ways of dealing with it and finally the human species “grows toward maturity” (Slaughter, 1996b).

An opportunity emerged to develop social foresight and to legitimise and professionalise the foresight field in Australia when Slaughter was offered a Professorial Fellowship to set up the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) in 1999 following the closure of the Australian Labor Government’s Commission for the Future (CFF). Core purposes of the AFI included to understand and help create social foresight in Australia and to support the emergence of a new generation of foresight practitioners (Slaughter, 2004). The AFI program took place in a “broad disciplinary domain” going beyond the dominant tradition (Slaughter, 2004) and included a focus on critical futures studies.

One function of the AFI was to develop new post-graduate courses, and in 2001 classes commenced in the Master of Science (Strategic Foresight) which was eventually to become the Master of Strategic Foresight (MSF). The AFI held the view that “depth within the practitioner is what evokes depth and capability in whatever method is being used” (Slaughter, 2004). As such, in designing the postgraduate program, Slaughter placed emphasis on developing the inner world of students using Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory. In 2002, the AFI created the first postgraduate course unit anywhere in the world on ‘Integral Futures’ to address the “superficiality in futures studies thinking and practice” (Slaughter, 2004). Slaughter (2004) argued that integral futures work offered a way of “bringing together work from many different streams and traditions of enquiry”, combining an understanding of both the internal and outer world. The Knowledge Base of Future Studies (KBFS) was a fundamental part of the curriculum with a copy provided to all students.

Research was also an important focus of the overall AFI program. A key research project was “Creating and Sustaining Social Foresight in Australia” which included the establishment the AFI’s publishing program in 2003, including the launch of the Australian Foresight Institute Monograph Series.

Unfortunately the AFI was relatively short-lived. It was disestablished at SUT in 2004 due to a change in university policy over what could be called an institute and Slaughter left the university soon after. The MSF continued for another fourteen years under the stewardship of Peter Hayward, Joseph Voros, Rowena Morrow and a number of other committed academics and professionals. While the program changed and evolved over the years, it remained dedicated to developing the inner world of students while helping them to understand the civilisational challenge. As a recent graduate of the MSF, I can attest to the personal transformation journey that I and many other graduates experienced as we were challenged to rethink our assumptions, biases and worldviews. It was a course like no other and finally closed in 2018¹.

Conclusion

¹ The interested reader can find the story of the rise and fall of the AFI and the associated MSF in the recently published reboot of the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies 2020 (Bowden, 2020).

The civilisational challenge described by Slaughter feels very present in 2021. We are experiencing the effects of a changing climate. Ingrained inequities are fuelling international acts of violence and terror, and threatening democracy as we know it. Family violence is increasing, and more and more people are experiencing mental ill-health. Coronavirus has ravaged societies and economies, the effects of which will be felt for years. It is likely that we have a decade of disruption ahead of us, with some of these disruptions existential in nature (Sardar and Hames, 2020). It is ironic that at the time humanity needs foresight more than ever, it seems that our field in Australia is slipping backwards.

Over his professional life, Slaughter worked hard to progress development towards social foresight in order to overcome the global predicament we face. The disestablishment of the AFI and the more recent closing of the MSF feel like a massive blow. When Slaughter was writing in the 1990s and early 2000's, he had a sense of optimism about our ability to avoid a dystopian future. He said "foresight in the 1990's means consciously working to complete the transition to a more sustainable world while there is time to achieve it and the future remains open" (Slaughter, 1996a). However more recently his view seems to be that the future no longer remains open, stating "the optimism it (the notion of 'alternative futures') signified, the sense of unqualified agency, no longer rings true – or at least not as convincingly" (Slaughter, 2020). He argued that after decades of inaction there is now only one possible climate future, with our only power now in the area of adaptation to this inevitable future.

While the task ahead seems daunting, we need to refocus on facilitating a futures discourse at a societal level to foster more inclusive worldviews and develop a 'wise culture'. Foresight professionals have the concepts, methods and tools to facilitate such a discourse. As Slaughter suggested, we need to ensure that our work explores and develops the inner world of individuals and society and includes consideration of the external world. In Australia, we need to come together to establish formal structures that will legitimate, professionalise and promote the work that we do. By uniting as a professional community we can take the next step toward developing social foresight capacity and therefore strengthen the ability of humanity to comprehend and respond to our predicament in ways that take us toward better futures.

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