

Disentangling strategic foresight? A critical analysis of the term building on the pioneering work of Richard Slaughter

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Introduction

Foresight isn't strategy and strategy isn't foresight. They are two distinct concepts, albeit highly associated with each retaining unique processes, aims and assumptions. Scholarship on the relationship between the concepts are tricky and empirical evidence is evasive even in related mainstream disciplines such as strategic management and psychology. From a social science perspective delineating foresight from strategy, and considering how they interact becomes even trickier as different knowledge claims or paradigms, compete for legitimisation and acceptance. As a result, the academic understanding of the relationship between foresight and strategy has become blurred despite some definitional clarity provided by those who introduced the concept of 'strategic foresight'.

For many in the Futures Studies field, the work of Richard Slaughter is a beacon and reminder of what strategic foresight (SF) is, and isn't. His works have drawn on the wisdom of previous scholars and in turn, continues to shape the work of others almost three decades since he first described the term.

As Slaughter notes foresight has "ubiquitous uses in everyday life ... But its implementation at the social level presents difficulties which have not yet been fully resolved" (Slaughter 1990, p. 801). This observation continues to run true. The Futures Studies / foresight field (Hines 2020b) embodies the academic pursuit of studying and reporting on the social interests, methods, focal domains, capacity building and outcomes associated developing alternative futures (Slaughter 2008). This is done in order to broaden the scope of possibility and inform decision making across a broad range of applications.

Futures Studies is particularly interested in the link between exercising human agency and the ability to 'create' a preferred future from a set of alternative futures. This interest is often conveyed in terms of the question "how does foresight and strategy interact?" and is of fundamental importance to a field dedicated to informing action. That said, it must be noted that strategy is not the only way action toward achieving a preferred future can be initiated. But it is probably the most well-known due to its prolific occurrence in the management literature driven by mostly commercial interests.

A Google Scholar search of the term 'Strategic Foresight' yields approximately 208 000 results and a Google search, over 24 million results. In contrast, a Google Scholar search of the term 'strategic foresight' prior to the time of Slaughter's (1996) *Foresight beyond strategy: Social initiatives by business and government* only yields 185 results. Seemingly only Slaughter and Godet make any attempt to define it.

The exponential growth of works drawing on the term 'Strategic Foresight' illustrates its perceived relevance in a time typified by rapid and discontinuous change. With such growth in use, echoing that of the terms 'sustainability' and more recently 'innovation', there is a

danger that the term becomes overused, misunderstood and even abused. Slaughter (1999, p. np) warns “the analysis of trends, the development of scenarios and the merging of strategy with foresight have proceeded apace. But in the rush to explore or even ‘colonise’ the future, to derive new products and market share, or merely to protect organisations against future contingencies, some of the more vital and substantial aspects of ‘what futures studies is about’ have been overlooked”. A key premise of this essay is that more than two decades later this has increasingly become the case.

Drawing on Slaughter’s (and other) earlier works this essay seeks to ‘disentangle SF’ and move toward a common understanding of a definition of SF. In this pursuit, the essay also illustrates the significant contribution of Slaughter’s efforts in curating futures knowledge, specifically on the question of how foresight and strategy are related.

Strategic Foresight: where does it come from?

The notion that foresight and strategy are closely associated is not new. Indeed, it is largely intuitive and closely related to how the brain functions. Humans have the capacity to fulfill this function by first anticipating the future by asking “what can happen?” which then informs the answer to “what should I do next?” Written records of the interplay between anticipation and resultant action can be traced back at least 2500 years as illustrated by the writings of Sun Tzu and the Greek philosophers.

Foresight has been defined as an innate human ability (Slaughter 1999; Hayward 2003; Gary 2008; Dian 2009; van der Laan & Erwee 2012) and that it may inform a string of diverse strategic decisions (eg. Mintzberg 1978; Hamel & Prahalad 1994; Cuhls 2003; Voros 2003). For futures studies it may have been best described in de Jouvenel’s (1964) seminal work *The art of conjecture*. More recently, the function between foresight and strategy has been described in clinical terms as “an adaptive capacity that enables humans to engage in deliberate, prudent action on the basis of remembering past episodes (episodic memory) and simulating future scenarios (episodic foresight)” (Miloyan, McFarlane & Suddendorf 2019). Note that a) the prudent action is *based on* exercising foresight, and b) the qualification of prudence suggests an evaluation of choices after considering alternative futures that then leads to deliberate action. The empirical evidence underpinning this conclusion is now widely accepted in the literature.

Influenced by Slaughter’s work Conway and Voros (2003) suggest that at an organisational level it follows that all employees thus have the capacity to contribute to its strategy. However, broad based participation in the formulation of organisational strategy remains very limited and has long been bemoaned (Mintzberg 2004).

Slaughter employs and succinctly describes this logic in terms of his description of the collective potential of developing social foresight in addressing civilisational issues (Slaughter, Richard A 1996c; Slaughter 1997a) while doing so outside of the strategic management paradigm (Slaughter, Richard A 1996b). That said, he makes the point that the purpose of SF is to open up spaces for innovation, and addressing civilisational and organisational challenges (Slaughter 1997a, 1997b).

What is strategic foresight?

As already noted, use of the term SF is now prolific. The Futures Studies field has provided some meaningful insights as to the definition and meaning of SF. Knowledge contributions have been broad, ranging from the early work of Godet (Godet & Bonnaure 1992; 1993) on the notion of strategic prospective to more recent contributions such as that by (Iden, Methlie & Christensen 2017; Klüfers et al. 2017; Sarpong, Eyres & Batsakis 2019).

So how does Slaughter define SF? In his work *Developing and applying strategic foresight*, Slaughter (1997a, p. 13) defines SF as “the ability to create and maintain high-quality coherent and functional forward views and to use the insights arising in organisationally useful way; for example [but not limited to] detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy, to explore new markets, products and services”. From this it can be deduced that Slaughter frames SF as an ability to be used, not only in a strategy context but as an input to broader organisational and public decision making.

Schwarz, Rohrbeck and Wach (2020, p. 4) differentiate SF from corporate foresight and confirm that SF is an individual ability as a concept, or a term used to “deliberately to emphasize the close relationship between foresight and strategy” as suggested by Coates, Durance and Godet (2010). Schwarz et al. seem to apply a consistent approach to the origins of the concept and its definition as an ability and not as foresight or strategy itself. If not used in terms of a measurable concept defined as an individual ability, then they confirm Coates et al. that it is limited to being a descriptive term.

In their influential works Hines and Bishop (2006; 2013; Hines 2020a) associate SF as an approach, in particular as related to their Framework Foresight process. Bishop, Tamarchak, Williams and Radvanyi (2020, p. 534; 5) go on to describe SF as with an “an approach to long-term forecasting”, as an “exercise” and that the “exercise [is] undertaken to inform the development of the institute’s next strategic plan”. Similarly, Voros’ (2003) generic foresight process framework also points toward a process whose outputs (possible futures) are considered as an input into strategy. It is deduced that SF as promoted in this line of enquiry is intended to be a descriptive term illustrating the close relationship between foresight and strategy and i) provides an overarching framework that links foresight to strategy and b) in practice, as a process that seeks to provide an input into strategic thinking, formulation and planning.

The view that SF aims to provide an input for consideration into the strategy formulation and planning seems to be consistently applied in the literature (Cuhls 2003; Voros 2003; Van der Laan 2008; Lavoix 2010; Iden, Methlie & Christensen 2017; Klüfers et al. 2017). Figure 1 presents an adaptation of Voros’ generic foresight framework and is intended to illustrate how SF can be described as an approach that includes foresight ability, process and activities with the intention of informing strategy as described in the literature above.

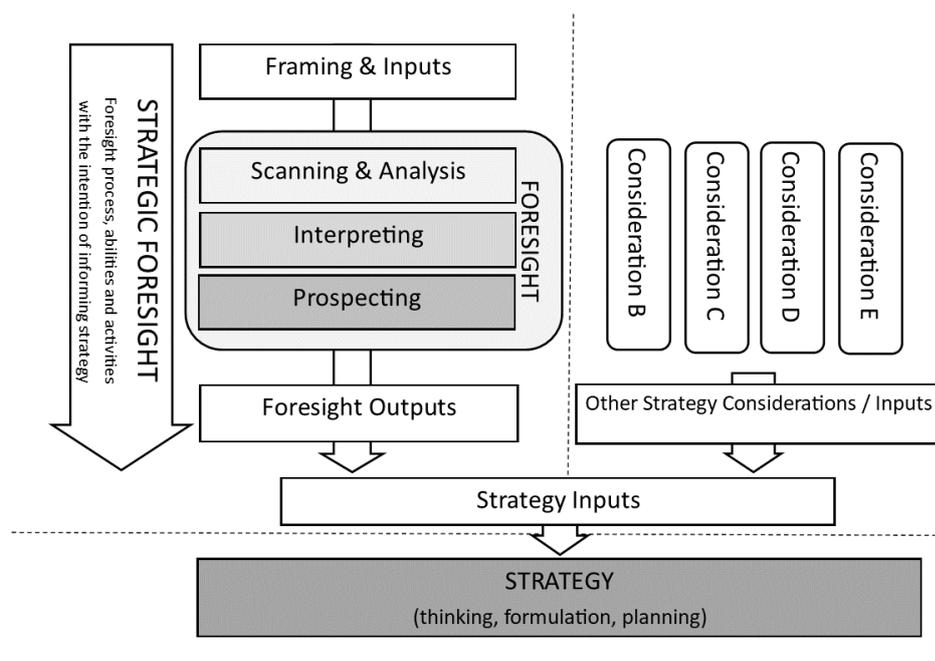


Figure 1: Strategic foresight and the relationship between foresight and strategy (Adapted from Voros, 2003)

Strategic Foresight and the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies

One of the most admirable contributions by Slaughter was his determination to curate Futures Studies knowledge. Most notable in his efforts was curating a *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (KBFS) (Slaughter 1993; Slaughter, Richard A 1996a; Slaughter 2002; Slaughter, Inayatullah & Ramos 2005; Slaughter & Hines 2020). He readily acknowledges that it is a reflective sample rather than a comprehensive and definitive collection of futures studies literature. Yet it is of interest as an indicator to what extent and how strategic foresight is referred to in the latest 2020 edition as a reflection of the knowledge base of the field. Table 1 presents the occurrence of the term 'strategic foresight' in this important compendium.

Table 1: Number and category of occurrences of the term "Strategic Foresight" in KBFS 2020

Use of the term "Strategic Foresight"	NUMBER OCCURENCES	OF	DESCRIPTION
Conceptual			
Concept / method	4		<i>Mention as concept or method</i>
Field	4		<i>SF referred to as a field</i>
	8		
Descriptor			
Term	8		<i>In title or used as a term describing a topic</i>
Activities	5		<i>Mention of SF activities</i>
Programme	10		<i>Reference to a university programme name</i>
Descriptor in author biography	16		<i>Author's education and activity</i>
References	12		<i>Occurrence in reference list</i>
	51		

What is revealing about this simple analysis is that nowhere in the KBFS 2020 edition is SF defined, measured or tested. It is predominantly used to describe the education and biography of authors. The term is mostly a descriptor used to refer to a title or topic (8), particular foresight activities (eg. scenarios), a degree programme name (10), author biographies (16) or in the reference list (12). It is also referred to alongside the term foresight without differentiation (8). The term 'foresight' is mentioned 1160 times. As a concept or process SF is mentioned only four times without substantive discussion. However, proliferation of the term SF more broadly in academic discourse seems to have outstripped meaningful scholarship of the concept and indeed seems mostly to be used i.e. as a "trendy topic" (Fergnani 2020) or a descriptor of activities that have more mainstream appeal.

It is important not to underestimate the impact of the use of the term due to the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University's naming its master's degree as in 'Strategic Foresight'. The naming of the degree was "deliberately chose[n] to focus on Strategic Foresight rather than Futures Studies as it was felt that "people did not understand what Futures Studies was all about" (Bowden 2020, p. 267). This was justifiable especially given Slaughter's earlier defining of the concept and its potential to influence change. Slaughter was aware that while an external audience is likely to be unfamiliar with Futures Studies, they would more readily understand the term SF. Similarly, other universities have either used the term SF in naming their degrees or in describing the Futures Studies field for the same reasons. This seems to account for the large number of descriptors found in the KBFS relative to the few times it is academically investigated, a tendency also reflected across mainstream academic discourse. It also seems that the term SF is now broadly known and as such Slaughter's intention largely realised but at what cost?

That said, there seems to be agreement that SF has been conceived as a term used to describe an ability (Slaughter), activity aimed at informing strategic considerations (Godet) or process (Hines & Bishop). What these all have in common is the intention of influencing strategic decision making and action as they relate to civilisational, social and organisational challenges.

So what's the problem?

The possible overuse and contamination of the term SF has academic implications. These include i) inaccurate accounts of the concept, ii) false empirical claims that do not meet validity and reliability considerations, and iii) inaccurate theory building. Most profound however is the impact this has on the field of Futures Studies and its legitimacy. It logically follows that if a field persists in promoting an academically indefensible idea, it will result in a decline in legitimacy.

Expanding upon this theme, it is argued that "the notion of foresight used by futurists has become contaminated by a) the inaccurate definitions made popular by the Futures Studies field itself, and b) presenting foresight to do what it fundamentally is unable to do. What jumps to mind in the latter respect is the inaccurate use of the term strategic foresight" (van der Laan 2020). This statement was meant to convey that many accounts of SF from the

Futures Studies field continue to claim that its methods for developing foresight include strategic decision making and action. In practice this is seldom if ever the case.

A key point in this regard is illustrated by the case study proffered by Bishop et al. (2020). They illustrate the valuable contribution of a disciplined enquiry into the futures of cancer research with the intention of informing the strategic planning process of a cancer research centre. The outcome of the foresight method applied were a set of scenarios. The authors conclude (Bishop et al. 2020, p. 547) that “the findings from this strategic foresight exercise are having a significant influence in OICR’s strategic planning for the future and the shape of its current and emerging priorities”. The key point being that the product of the foresight exercise informs the institution’s strategic decision making and planning as a separate process often carried out by a different group of decision makers.

What is critical to understand is that the possible futures that are produced by foresight are only one of a number of considerations required by decision makers in formulating strategy. These include (but are not limited to) available resources, current operational considerations, planning timeframes, available talent, risk tolerance, current distribution channels, market conditions, lending conditions, government incentives, stakeholder interests (eg. shareholder ROI expectations) and the vision of the dominant coalition of the organisation. Further, it is well documented that foresight outcomes end up not being considered at all (Godet 2000; Van der Laan & Yap 2016) or “that SF insights are rapidly diffused, which implies that future insights might not reach relevant decision-makers” (Rohrbeck et al. 2009, p. 32).

Moreover, a lack of leadership capabilities and inclinations toward short termism, managerialism, individual hubris, greed and deceit (Hamel 2012) further confound the assumption that foresight includes strategic decision making and planning. More specifically, it is very rare that foresight exercises in practice include actual strategic decision making by the organisation’s leadership. Rather, the leadership may consider foresight outcomes in their later decision making. Indeed, “foresight is not widely practiced by decision makers because when things are going well, they can manage without it, and when things are going badly, it is too late to see beyond the ends of their noses” (Godet 2000, p. 3). For Futures Studies scholars and foresight practitioners to claim that foresight ability, process or activities includes strategy formulation, decision making, resource allocation and planning is largely fanciful and quickly recognised as such by strategic decision makers thus leading to a decline in legitimacy.

Differentiating foresight from strategy is succinctly made by prominent scholars such as Hamel (Hamel & Prahalad 2005; Hamel 2009) and Liedtka (Buehring & Liedtka 2018; Buehring & Liedtka 2018) to mention just two. Indeed Buehring and Liedtka refer to the “intersection of strategic planning, foresight and design” (Buehring & Liedtka 2018, p. 134). This differentiation has been empirically illustrated using structural equation modelling (SEM) which concludes that foresight and strategic thinking capabilities are distinctly different yet highly related constructs (Van der Laan 2008; van der Laan 2010; van der Laan & Erwee 2012; van der Laan & Erwee 2013; Van der Laan & Yap 2016).

Building on this brief review and critical commentary it is proposed that further scholarship is encouraged to create a defensible account of the concept of SF. This may include conducting a comprehensive systematic literature review and further research efforts to define and measure the constructs related to SF.

Conclusion

As a young executive completing a masters degree in Futures Studies at the Institute for Futures Research (University of Stellenbosch), the work of Slaughter strongly resonated with what I was observing in practice and in society. His work had a significant influence, alongside other Futures Studies scholars, on my understanding of the interplay between foresight and decision making in practice. I witnessed firsthand, the tension between the fiduciary responsibility of leaders to set strategic direction and the lack of foresight in informing those decisions. As an emerging Futures Studies scholar I was determined to investigate this relationship. As a consultant my observations, now in the Asia Pacific region, did not change despite ever-increasing evidence that foresight informing decision making is sorely needed.

This essay sought to distil some key insights as they relate to the term 'Strategic Foresight' based on an interpretation of Richard Slaughter's earlier works. It found that it has been described as an individual ability, a process or activity. Further, that research into the definition, nature and measurement of SF is scarce. However, its use as a descriptive term is widespread and abundant. The paper further suggests that the Futures Studies field should use the term 'strategic foresight' in an informed and academically defensible way so as a) refocus on its purpose of developing alternative possible futures that is intended to inform strategy, while b) protecting the integrity and c) increasing the legitimacy of the Futures Studies field.

SF positions the product of foresight methods and tools (most commonly scenario work) in the literature at the intersection or nexus of foresight and strategy. Its purpose is to provide an input into strategy formulation and planning and conceptually, does not include executive strategic decision making. It is proposed that based on the pioneering work of Slaughter, SF is defined as *a term describing the exercising of foresight utilising unique abilities and / or processes and / or activities with the intention of being considered as an input into strategic decision making by creating and maintaining high-quality coherent and functional forward views and to use the insights arising in organisationally useful ways.*

Futures Studies is a noble pursuit, and of great utility and potential benefit to humanity. For it to have impact it requires legitimacy as an academic field and sound practice. The legitimacy of emerging academic fields of research are highly dependent on the consistent use, definition and persuasive value of its key concepts and theories. This paper suggests that future research is needed to define, confirm and validate the concept of SF as a key concept in the field.

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