

A priceless gift – reflections on Richard Slaughter’s influence on working and living with the future

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Abstract

Richard Slaughter’s approach to understanding and teaching futures studies is foundational to the thinking and practice of the more than 160 students that went through the Master of Strategic Foresight program at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. I studied with Richard, worked with him and have been guided by his approach in my foresight practice for over 15 years. Richard’s contribution to the futures field is exemplified by his understanding of the role the interior development of the foresight practitioner plays in creating images of the future, his articulation of the civilizational challenges we face and his weaving of integral theory and futures thinking. This piece is a reflection on the impact Richard’s ideas about possible futures and the practice of foresight has had on the work I, and many others, deliver across numerous contexts and industries.

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1. Introduction

I felt a jolt of excitement when the invitation to contribute to this special issue dropped into my inbox. I was very aware that Richard Slaughter’s work was the basis of my futures and foresight practice but I had never consciously reflected on which ideas actually turn up for me now, after 15 years of professional foresight and future practice. Having the opportunity to look back has been a joy during this period of extended pandemic lockdown in Melbourne.

I joined the second cohort of the Master of Science (Strategic Foresight) at Swinburne University (MSF) in 2002, I also worked at the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne supporting the research program which delivered the AFI Monograph series looking at “investigating how social foresight may emerge through a series of distinct stages of development” (Slaughter, 2004b, p. 843). I started sessional teaching into the MSF in 2005, delivering the first-year foresight units in the MSF program, and then a variety of units in foresight and leadership across the business faculty until 2010. I have practiced foresight professionally since 2004, when I started delivering foresight processes and workshops to a variety of clients. Over time, my practice has evolved, and for the past 7 years I have been weaving foresight approaches into organisational development, technology implementations and customer led transformation programs in small, medium and large organisations.

2. As a beginner...

Like many who come to this work, I had been doing projects using futures thinking for years before I knew what it was. I had been studying and writing about what the future could look like during my under-graduate and post-graduate degrees. I had also been part of a project

team, in my first full time role, looking at changes to organisational operations in government 10 years into the future. When I decided to undertake a Master's degree in my late 20's, I went looking for something that could include these interests and I found the Master of Science (Strategic Foresight) at Swinburne University (MSF). I met Professor Richard Slaughter at the information evening for the MSF course, in the same room that evening was someone I had been to high school with 12 years before and 1000kms away, and someone else I had worked with in my first full time role. It felt like a small world, but one that rapidly blew my mind wide open. Richard introduced me to the idea of futures as an area of study and reflection, his approach to teaching was to encourage us to find our way through the material in a way that made sense to us. For me, in the first year, that looked like feminist futures, hope and climate change. It was a revelation to find an academic course in an area which I had no idea existed, and in the first week of classes it was obvious I had found my tribe.

Richard's ideas about, and approach to, the futures field is foundational to my understanding and practice. His definition of a futurist as "someone who has learned to study the future (as a symbolic realm if understanding) and understands how to use this knowledge to enable others to identify options and choices in the present" (Slaughter, 2004a, p. 37) is one that stills informs my work in 2020. Richard showed us that futurists work in many different contexts for a wide range of organisational types and those he admired have been positively engaged in furthering the techniques, methods and theories of the field.

3. Developing some skill...

The Master of Science (Strategic Foresight) was taught from 2001 – 2006 across full days that were challenging, invigorating and wonderful:

"Each unit is taught in what we call 'block mode', which simply means five full days, normally separated by a period of weeks (in year 1) or by a weekend (in years 2 and 3). We have found that this structure appeals strongly to the 'mid-career professionals' who take these courses. This pattern means that classes take place in concentrated combinations of full days, rather than through an extended sequence of evening classes when, by definition, people have less energy" (Slaughter, 2004b, p. 840).

As students we were encouraged, from very early on in our futures work, to develop new applications of tool and techniques, to weave ideas from outside into the futures canon and document what we thought in ways that could be shared with others. Richard wrote about the approach that he had taken in the MSF program in 2004: "a core feature of everything we do is to encourage students to move fluidly between multiple models, paradigms and frames of reference. It is our view that 'every model both reveals and conceals' aspects of reality at the same time. Hence, we attempt not to privilege any single one" (Slaughter, 2004b, pp. 841-2).

The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies (KBFS) was a core text for the Swinburne MSF, the breadth of the work that was in that collection was overwhelming at first. Working out where to start and what to make of the many articles and ways of thinking that were

different to what I had experienced in my academic and work experience to that point. How to first inhabit, and then try to understand views of the future that started from a different place to the one I stood in, but ended up somewhere that I could see, was very attractive to me. Having studied sociology at university, Habermas was not a stranger, but applying his theory of cognitive interests to developing views of the future certainly was (Slaughter, 1999, p. 217). Wrapped up with this, was the idea that we could develop the ability to take different perspectives. Richard was always at pains to present different ways of studying the future across different cultures. These were not just academic concepts, I was being asked to consciously develop my ways of thinking, to create new neural pathways in order to start to understand how to think across time and cultures about the futures that might emerge, change and shift.

The idea that each adult experiences levels of development across a life span, though the lens of Ken Wilber's Integral Theory and his four quadrants, was not my friend when we were first introduced in 2002 (Slaughter, 2010, pp. 131-147). I spent many hours despising the idea that there were more expansive ways of knowing than what I had until then inhabited. The idea of a holistic view through the four quadrants made sense, as did the idea of unfolding complexity over time in the social, physical and cultural quadrants but that the same theory could be applied to my psychology was irritating. I spent 12 months wrestling with moral philosophy, developmental psychology and the development of moral reasoning theories before I surfaced with a level of comfort around this way of thinking. Looking back now, from a place where my entire practice for the past 15 years has been scaffolded and supported by these ideas, it feels amazing that I had operated successfully for 30 years NOT knowing about them. This approach to thinking about the world around me, seeded and nurtured by Richard, has given me an opportunity for expanded thinking about problems, has driven me to develop inclusive and empowering programs of work and shown me, time and again, how little I know about how people operate. It has been a gift, I have had the opportunity to affect real change, show others how they might think this way and to feel the frustration of current systems and structures fighting back.

Richard started us on this path in class, when we were invited to take a critical view of all material, whether we agreed with it or not. Richard's question about any futures work was always 'whose position does it serve?' never whether it was good or not. Through this approach, he asked us to develop the ability to:

"acknowledge that we are all 'part of the problem' as well as, hopefully, 'part of the solution.' The issues raised here are not unique to the USA; they are shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by everyone whose current way of life stands at, or near, the top of existing 'pyramids of sacrifice'. Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge our own complicity in creating and re-creating exploitative and unsustainable organisations, cultures and outlooks" (Slaughter, 2008, p. 22).

Richard's critique of society in the early 2000's was something I had not heard before starting the MSF program. Richard's tutelage was my introduction to the idea that mine, and my children's future, may not be better than that experienced by my parents. As a child of the early baby boomers, and a grandchild of those who had experienced a depression and World War, I had been brought up in Australia to expect that my future would continue

to be an extrapolation of the present, to live longer and with more comfort than my grandparents and parents. Richard's introduction to the area of descent futures, climate change and dystopia was a rude wake up call. In 2002, when I started the Swinburne MSF I had heard of global warming but didn't know what it meant, and I was unaware of peak anything. Across the period during which I completed my Master's degree, worked for the Australian Foresight Institute and then Swinburne University's foresight unit, I immersed myself in literature about the future we are now living in.

4. Understanding and creating images of the future

One of the most compelling ideas (that still engages me now) is the concept of the image of the future. That the future does not exist - we instead understand, debate and possibly fight about an image of the future. Having read a lot of science fiction and fantasy as a child, I was on board with the idea that images of worlds and times that do not exist could colour my understanding and desires in the present.

"The main purpose of considering future – and images of futures – is not to predict what will happen in a hard or precise sense, nor even to select from alternatives. It is perhaps, to discern the wider ground from which images are constituted so as to take an active part in creating and nurturing those that seem worthwhile" (Slaughter, 1999, p. 55).

What I didn't realise until I was trained in futures thinking, was that we could study these images, understand them and possibly create images that people could use to support more humane and open futures for all. Richard introduced me to the work of Elise Boulding and Fred Polak, both of which were highly influential in the development of my foresight practice. I learned how to critique futures images, and it stuck me that this discipline was much like the history I has studied in high school, trying to stand in the medieval mind though their art and images, but in this case, we were projecting forward.

Through this period, with Richard's support, I was learning new theory, applying known theory to a new domain, learning and applying new tools and techniques and grappling with how all of this could be woven together and applied 'in the real world'. We oscillated from ideas and concepts to application and impact. This journey of discovery was not just external, I was also developing my knowledge of self. One of the fundamental areas that Richard's work is based upon, and probably the part of the futures canon that has had the most profound effect on my life, is the starting point that "radical uncertainty lies at the heart of everything, because everything is socially constructed" (Slaughter, 2004a, p. 93). Richard's argument is that "it is only by engaging with the critical and epistemological 'layers' of futures work that it is possible to begin to engage the problematiques of cultures in change and transformation" (Slaughter, 2004a, p. 99). We identified the layers, thought into and through them to try and plumb the 'depths' to then reconceptualise and reimagine what might be possible.

One of the key differentials between the program taught at Swinburne, and those in other parts of the world, was the focus on Integral Theory. Richard argued that Integral Theory is a way into the practice of foresight and futures thinking because "integral futures practitioners will seek to understand the nature, structure and limitations of their own

perspective...they will avoid being attached to any single view and be open to a wide range of perspectives and interpretations...what is commonly seen as occurring 'out there' in the world is conditioned by what is going on...in our inner frame of reference" (Slaughter, 2004a, pp. 165-6). Whilst studying foresight, I also became aware of what perspectives I held, I began to identify those held by others and choose whether I would pick them up or not. I was trained to deploy a range of interpretations for any given situation and often repeated the MSF mantra, 'another day, another model'.

My big insight during this period is that humans had created this future I was currently living in, so a different one could be created for my children and grandchildren. I would go home to my young family (my children were aged 6 months and 2 years old when I started the course) with my head buzzing about what I was learning and what it could mean for the future they might grow up into. I could see a need for foresight at the societal level, the development of individual capacity across many people leading to institutions of foresight which would help us to navigate what was increasingly looking like a difficult century.

5. Living with the future...

I started working at the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) in 2002 as the Publications Coordinator, working on the AFI monograph series and then the 2005 update of KBFS. This was an opportunity to understand and engage in the futures conversation across the globe. Our ideas and views of what made up useful ways to develop foresight were included in the 2005 version. During this period, I joined the World Future Society, the World Futures Studies Federation and then the Association of Professional Futurists and started to travel to conferences to see what was being spoken about and who was involved in the profession.

The biggest difference between the work we were doing in Australia, and what was happening overseas at that time, seemed to be our starting point that the developmental level of the practitioner will guide the futures that s/he will privilege. I had plumbed the edges of my perception and worldview to understand what I let in and what I rejected (and why). I had been trained to understand methodology and tools through the four quadrants, trying to match the contextual need to the sweet spot of the tool or technique through the use of methodological pluralism (Slaughter, 2004a, p. 159). I developed my ability to hold lightly onto models and theories - 'the map is not the territory' - and to consciously open up to ideas and perspectives that I might not agree with the understand their applicability to the problems that society increasingly seemed to becoming overwhelmed with.

Learning to live with ideas of collapse, descent and degrowth swirling around my mind for nearly two decades, whilst watching the pace of human consumption of our biosphere increase, has been both discombobulating and my growth edge. The grounding I received by reading Richard's work, amongst others, about the possibilities that might lie on the other side of a civilizational understanding of planetary limits has been a useful guide during this period. Developing my ability to tune into new ideas as they germinate, imagining how they may lead to fundamental shifts in how we live and work, is a core part of how I was trained by Richard, and the work I still do in the futures space.

I have lost count of the number of conversations I have had about the future as it emerges with the people I work with, my friends and acquaintances, and those in my community. In each interaction, I seek to find a place that we can meet, then I push the conversation just a bit further to see where we might end up. This approach and the change it generated can be traced back to Richard's work on futures studies as a "civilisational catalyst" where he asks us to "be prepared to venture out beyond their comfort zones and (be) willing to engage the public wherever, and whenever, the public may be found" (Slaughter, 2004a, p. 240). For me, futures work is a lived experience of poking and prodding the system at multiple levels and in any setting.

This is the domain and ideas that I am most thankful to Richard for showing me, both from a need to know what was possible, and then to learn to act in the face of it but also to equip my friends, family and community with information so we were all able to navigate our way was a priceless gift. I taught into the Swinburne foresight program as a sessional lecturer from 2005 to 2010, which was my way of giving to others the experience, that Richard gave to me, of having my eyes opened. I have used these insights to drive my work in the foresight field, then into organisational change and transformation. I am always looking for ways to engage individuals and organisations in the work to avoid, or at least mitigate, the existential crisis our civilisation is facing. My choice of industry, organisation and approach has been driven by the concepts and insights that Richard showed me. His personal example of continuing to turn up, to find the beauty in the biosphere and balance this with the beauty in our species, I still find inspiring.

The work Richard does has influenced and inspired the work I have chosen to do. It is not easy, and at times can feel soul destroying in its futility, however, I turn up, act when I have the opportunity, and assist others to think differently about the futures we can create together. Richard has always been a warm and generous guide, the team he created at the Australian Foresight Institute and the people who were drawn to study there, opened up a possibility space that is still bearing fruit and for that, I will always be grateful.

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