

# The critical futurist: Richard Slaughter's foresight practice

## Abstract

This short commentary explores Richard Slaughter's foresight practice – his strategies and methods for approaching futures thinking and futures doing. I concentrate on three areas where Richard has made significant strategic and methodological innovations that have carried the futures field forward. First, I discuss his foundational work to give futures studies genuine disciplinary status through the development of critical futures studies. I explore his use of critique, his advocacy of dissent and his expansion of the methodological repertoire of the field. Second, I note his valiant attempts to emancipate foresight practice through the concept of social foresight. Richard's vision of the routine application of foresight across society, supported by institutions of foresight and a thriving critical discipline is a compelling one. While social foresight remains a vision, Richard provided guidance on how to get there that remains highly relevant. Finally, I outline Richard's pioneering translation of Ken Wilber's philosophy into an integral futures practice. While there have been controversies along the way, the development of Wilberian integral futures has undoubtedly supported more comprehensive futures thinking that gives due attention to interiors as well as exteriors.

Keywords: Foresight practice; critical futures studies; social foresight; integral futures; Richard Slaughter

## Highlights

- This short commentary summarises three of Richard Slaughter's key contributions to foresight practice
- Discusses Richard's development of critical futures studies and its disciplinary contribution
- Notes his important concept of social foresight and its emancipatory distributed vision for application of foresight
- Outlines his development of Wilberian integral futures and its contributions to the field
- Reflects on Richard's influence on my own foresight practice

## 1 Introduction

I first discovered Richard Slaughter's work in 2002, during my doctoral studies. I was working on an engineering model to demonstrate the technical and economic feasibility of a renewable energy future for Australia, but I was having nagging doubts about the value of the whole exercise. I could demonstrate the feasibility of a particular future, but would that make it come to pass? It was starting to dawn on me that the future is political – a contested space.

To try to make sense of this emerging insight, I turned to the futures literature. One of the first articles that spoke directly to my concerns was Richard's *Beyond the Mundane* (Slaughter, 2002). It triggered a journey into the epistemology of futures work that would change the direction of my research and my career. Richard's work, alongside Sohail Inayatullah's post-structuralism (Inayatullah, 1990, 1998), helped me to see that I had been working in an uncritical, empirical

futures tradition. I soon found myself on a new path that would lead to an integral futures thesis (Riedy, 2005) and a shift from engineering to the social sciences. I am sure I was not the only one who found reading Richard's work revelatory.

In this short commentary I focus on Richard's foresight practice – his strategies and methods for approaching futures thinking and futures doing. I have grouped his contributions to the practice of foresight under three themes: his foundational work to give futures studies genuine disciplinary status; his attempts to emancipate foresight practice through the concept of social foresight; and his pioneering translation of Ken Wilber's philosophy into an integral futures practice. In all of these areas, he has contributed important strategic and methodological innovations to the futures field.

## 2 Building a discipline: Critical futures studies

Richard has consistently argued that futures studies needs a strong disciplinary basis if it is to be taken seriously by decision-makers and the public (Slaughter, 1998a, 2016). Achieving disciplinary legitimacy for the study of something that does not yet exist would require rigorous, defensible methods (Slaughter, 1990). Richard's first major contribution to building futures studies as a discipline was to propose, develop and teach critical futures studies. His 1982 doctoral thesis on critical futures education used critical in two senses – constructive critique coupled with the emancipatory commitment of critical theory. In later writing, he makes it clear that this is not just an epistemological commitment but a methodological one:

a 'critical futurist' regards critique as a central methodology. The essential point is: 'probing beneath the surface' (of social reality), or 'looking more deeply' (Slaughter, 1998a, p. 374).

Thus, critique became one of Richard's most enduring methods. He has been a fierce critic of pop futurism over his career – indeed, of any futures work that lacks methodological rigour and criticality. Many of Richard's articles use critical analysis of futures publications to reveal the underlying discourse or narrative that produced the futures work, and its limitations. His review of work on 'megatrends' (Slaughter, 1993b) and his integral assessment of climate change literature (Slaughter, 2009a) are typical of this strand of his work. In this and many other works, the problematic discourses he draws attention to are those that are obsessed with exteriors over interiors, empiricism over interpretation and pop futurism over critical futures.

From this critical starting point, several strands of disciplinary work emerged. First, Richard has consistently sought to expand the methodological repertoire of futurists beyond predictive forecasting to embrace methods consistent with a wider range of epistemological positions. This commitment is evident in his reviews of other methods, such as the QUEST environmental scanning technique, where he lauds its exploration of alternative futures rather than a single predicted future (Slaughter, 1990). It is also evident in his development of new tools and methods, such as the Transformative Cycle or T-Cycle (Slaughter, 2004b), which envisages transformation as a process of breakdown in meaning, followed by re-conceptualisations, negotiations and conflicts and selective legitimation before the cycle restarts. This commitment to methodological expansion would be developed even further in his work on integral futures, discussed below.

Second, taking the critical stance seriously means that futurists cannot stand idle in the face of conventional politics and all the other institutions that contribute to the global problematique (Slaughter, 1999c). Richard called for futurists to adopt a stance of dissent, regardless of the consequences for their status and funding. He pointed to the methods and strategies available to support such a stance: critical futures studies; multicultural futures work; macrohistory; and

design/visioning approaches. He outlined a vision for a 'transformational future' that would deliver a 'wise culture' (Slaughter, 1999c). Over the last decade, many scholars have taken up his call to pursue transformation (e.g. Fazey et al., 2020).

A third strand of Richard's critique led to the development of a layered or depth-based view of futures work. This was perhaps best expressed in his 2002 article, *Beyond the Mundane*, where he identified progressively deeper levels of futures work: pop futurism; problem-oriented futures work; and critical and epistemological futures studies (Slaughter, 2002). In this work, Richard encouraged methods that asked deeper questions, exploring the role of discourses and worldviews in shaping futures.

In addition to his critical methodological practice, Richard has worked to build the conceptual foundation of futures studies to enable futures discourse. In his 1993 article on futures concepts he notes that 'while methodologies are important, it is primarily concepts and ideas which enable a futures discourse' (Slaughter, 1993a, p. 289). Of course, as that article makes abundantly clear, futures concepts are the foundation of methods and many have clear methodological implications. Take the archetypal scenarios outlined in that article, based on Jim Dator's original set: breakdown; repressive or managed societies; business-as-usual; ecological decentralist; and transformational. While they are conceptual, they point towards a method in which the 'future of x' is explored by generating scenarios of each of these types. The conceptual enables the methodological, and Richard's work has enabled the futures field to become far more disciplined about its work than it was before.

Richard's longstanding work on a Knowledge Base of Futures Studies (KBFS) is exemplary in this regard. First published in book form in 1996, the KBFS became my first point of reference to learn about the diverse futures methods that might suit whatever project I was working on. There have been multiple versions over the years, including a new update this year (Slaughter, 2020). Through this and other work, Richard laid the conceptual groundwork for futures studies to strive towards disciplinary status.

### 3 Social foresight

Richard's concern with the disciplinary legitimacy of futures work was not driven by academic ambitions or a desire for status. Rather, his ultimate goal was for futures studies to enable the development of 'social foresight':

My main concern is to participate in, and help create, an advanced futures discourse. In my view it is this above all else that nourishes the raw human capacity for foresight. Beyond this, futures methods and tools, and what I call 'institutions of foresight' constitute 'layers of capability' which enable a society-wide foresight capacity (Slaughter, 1998a, p. 374).

In his notion of 'social foresight' (Slaughter, 1996, 2004a), Richard imagines a radically new kind of foresight practice in which rigorous thinking about the future is emancipated from the disciplinary confines of futures studies and becomes a routine social practice. Richard argues that 'scanning, warning, direction-setting, determining priorities, education of decision-makers, informing and involving the public and so on are...too important to be left to private interests or to chance' (Slaughter, 1996, p. 157).

One way to develop social foresight capacity is through the development of 'institutions of foresight' that bring foresight capacity into the public domain, such as the Australian Commission for the

Future (Slaughter, 1999b). While there have sadly been more failures than successes in this regard, Richard has sought to draw out and share the lessons (Slaughter, 1999b).

Another approach is to engage the public with imagery that gives viewers a tangible sense of possible futures. In 1997, Richard reviewed what he called 'near-future landscapes' (Slaughter, 1997) – attempts to create visualisations of the future. This early work anticipated the developments in virtual reality and multimedia technologies that now underpin the field of experiential futures (Candy & Dunagan, 2017).

Sadly, despite these efforts, social foresight capacity is still sorely lacking in 2020 as events like the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing climate disruption illustrate. Richard's vision for the role of foresight in society remains as relevant as ever.

## 4 Integral futures

While seeking to expand the methodological repertoire of futures studies, Richard has avoided mere eclecticism by advocating for integration of futures work from different traditions. As early as 1993, he called for methods that combine 'three levels of futures work (problem-oriented, critical and epistemological), three futures traditions (the empirical/analytic, critical/interpretative and activist/visionary) and a range of cultures, particularly non-Western ones' (Slaughter, 1993b, p. 848). However, this integration would be given further impetus by the publication of Ken Wilber's all-quadrants, all-levels (AQAL) framework.

Richard drew on the AQAL framework to develop Wilberian integral futures over the course of multiple articles. He began to explore the implications of Wilber's thinking for futures studies in 1998's *Transcending Flatland* (Slaughter, 1998b). Then, in 1999, he proposed a new approach to the core futures method of environmental scanning, using Wilber's four quadrants as a guide (Slaughter, 1999a). He argued that futurists needed to scan for developments in four distinct worlds:

- The world of individual meaning and purpose
- The world of cultures and shared meanings
- The world of individual capability and behaviour
- The physical world.

He identified scanning resources for entering all four of these worlds and argued that the top two in the list – the inner worlds – were inadequately scanned by futurists. As Richard put it, this blind sport could cause scanners 'to overlook some of the most subtle but powerful sources of change around' (Slaughter, 1999a, p. 451). In drawing out the futures of Wilber's quadrants, Richard offered a new 'meta-map' for environmental scanning, one that systematised the process while striving to be inclusive. It was inspirational stuff for me and shortly thereafter I was glued to Wilber's books over a summer that would change my worldview.

Richard continued to explore the implications of Wilber's quadrants for the futures field in a 2001 paper on knowledge creation (Slaughter, 2001) where he proposed a knowledge creation cycle that is common to all futures methods. He also noted that some methods have particular strengths in one quadrant, so that a more complete view of the future can be generated by using different methods together.

I collaborated with Richard on an ambitious 2008 special issue of *Futures* that sought to further develop integral futures methodologies (Slaughter, 2008). Our intent was to build out the toolbox of

futures methods that took an integral perspective. However, in our embrace of Wilberian integral futures, we were too quick to force other methods (some integral in their own right) to fit with Wilber's quadrants and levels. There was an understandable critical reaction (Inayatullah, 2010) that led to much soul searching, for me at least. While I now believe some of our work in that special issue was a misstep, I continue to admire Richard's drive to find methods that could open up interiors for futures thinking.

In a more successful application of integral futures methods, Richard led a collaboration to use a novel integral metascanning method to examine the state of play in the futures field (Slaughter, 2009c, 2009b). This metascanning method was developed at the Australian Foresight Institute and categorised futures work according to the organisational type producing it; the social interests at play (pragmatic, progressive or civilisational); the methods used (linear, systemic, critical or integral); which of Wilber's quadrants were the focus; how the work contributed to the development of social foresight; and the country of origin. This approach delivered a wealth of insights into the futures field at the time and areas for development. It found that civilisational, critical and integral work was rare, too little work focused on development of social foresight, and quality control in the field was poor (Slaughter, 2009b). Further, the influence of futures work on policy in important areas such as sustainability was minimal (Riedy, 2009).

Richard used a similar approach in the same year to review a significant body of climate change literature and help to locate each piece on Wilber's integral map (Slaughter, 2009a). What I like most about this piece, and the reason that I finish this commentary with it, is that it sought to honour the contributions of each author while taking a critical perspective. This, I think, sums up Richard's integral approach – look for and honour the positive contributions but take a critical view to identify omissions.

## 5 Conclusion

I personally owe a great debt to Richard. His work inspired me to take a different path, moving beyond empirical and predictive futures work to embrace critical and integral futures studies. He was one of several authors that helped to shift my worldview and illuminate the interior view that I had been missing up until then. He examined my doctoral thesis and has been a generous mentor throughout my career.

I have outlined three important contributions that Richard has made to foresight practice. First, he has tirelessly pursued foundational work to give futures studies genuine disciplinary status. Second, his concept of social foresight and the pathways to get there remains one of the most compelling visions of the purpose of futures work. Finally, his translation of Ken Wilber's integral theory into an integral futures practice has opened the way for futurists to pay closer attention to interiors when exploring futures. In all of these areas, he has contributed important strategic and methodological innovations.

Perhaps most importantly, Richard has continued to speak truth to power throughout his career – he has stayed true to his own call for futurists to be responsible dissenters (Slaughter, 1999c). I want to close with a favourite quote from Richard that I use frequently to introduce the motivation for futures work. These words guide my own work on sustainable futures:

Overall, there are two basic motivations for looking ahead and studying the future. One is to avoid danger...The second is to set goals, dream dreams, create visions, make designs; in short, to project upon the future a wide range of purposes and intentions (Slaughter, 2004a, p. xxii).

I can think of no better summary of why we must continue to critique and dissent from futures that marginalise people and planet, while imagining transformative pathways towards better futures.

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