

Action Research as Foresight Methodology

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Introduction

To the action researcher, who laboriously spends his or her hours working within the local contexts of communities or organisations to co-generate meaningful research, and who's theories are hardened on the anvil of creating meaningful social change; futures studies might seem the discipline the most peripheral to its interests, and the most ill equipped to deal with the local and intimate domain of community existence. To the futurist, who laboriously spends his or her hours understanding the nuances of history and social change, who through persistent work, begins to make sense of the weak signals and the subtle shifts, action research would seem as simply an auxiliary field, inappropriate for understanding the greater scheme. I invite the reader, however, whether they belong to one camp or the other, to let go of their respective disciplinary perspectives, and see both belonging to each other.

Futures studies is a growing field with a long tradition of powerful and beneficial inquiry. It has diversified through its trans-disciplinary embrace of such fields as systems thinking, education, hermeneutics, macro-history, sociology, management, ecology, literature, ethics, philosophy, planning and other. It is now a complexly integrated field with many lines of inquiry weaved together into a dynamic, if paradoxical, whole. Although there are many unresolved issues within the discipline, futures studies and foresight are now in widespread use in numerous areas.

Action research is a line of scholarship stemming from sociology, rural and community development and industrial relations, among other places. Like futures studies, it also is a young, yet growing discipline. It is a discipline that formulates social action for social research, and social research for social action. In the language of Davydd Greenwood:

Action research is social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organisation or community seeking too improve their situation. action research promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders.

Together, the professional researcher and the stakeholders define the problem to be examined, co-generate relevant knowledge about them, learn and execute social research techniques, take actions, and interpret the results of actions based on what they have learned¹.

Participation

One of the key concepts in action research is participation. The meaning of this word has been given much attention in this field, and there is a particular branch of action research, participatory action research, that makes participation its central tenet. In participatory action research (PAR),



for example, a planning process is participatory, meaning that a broad body of stakeholders (not just shareholders) are involved in the planning process, be this community, organisational or state. Such participatory planning leads to co-generative action and this co-generated action leads to shared reflection, and the ongoing re-conceptualisation of planning. Yoland Wadsworth has pioneered such a 'collectivist' approach, which translates shared knowledge into social action, for many years.²

By contrast, futures studies leans toward expert or strategic planning normally used within upper management or government policy circles by those who have command and control power to steer the direction of an organization. This combines sensitivity to an organisation's future environment with sensitivity to an organisations internal values/mission/capacity, translates this into 'visionary' directives, and implements these through intelligent planning and action taking. The mountain top view of environmental change and internal operations prevails, and change is conducted from the top down by a management/policy elite. Yet this approach has been criticised for the inflexibility of the plans created, and the micro-managed details of implementation that are formulated through such gap analysis.³ This kind of expert process has also been said to alienate the very same people who have created the strategic plans in the first place, through over-professionalised jargon and technical superiority on the part of professional planners. At its worst people subsequently become slaves to the plans they sponsor.

While this kind of approach is certainly useful and necessary in many situations, as organisations and even nations must sometimes make radical changes based on perceived threats and opportunities, action research aims to deal with the alienating effects of such expert/non-expert divisions through a reflective (not dogmatic) participatory approach. In action research the research process is open to many and facilitated to promote fairness. Outcomes support participants' interests so that the knowledge created helps participants to control their own destiny.⁴ Actions are generated by the participants themselves ensuring a maximum amount of self-determination. Finally, the action researcher, through the process of capacity building, becomes redundant:

The outsider [action researcher] gradually lets go control so that the insider can learn how to control and guild their own development process.⁵

Such a participatory ethos extends into the classroom, where instead of enforcing the passivity of students in a lecture type setting, students are encouraged to 'learn by doing', experiment and collaborate. Richard Slaughter has pioneered such an 'action learning' approach to futures education, a kind of pedagogy in which students are challenged to question the future through various futures related activities.⁶ Such a strategy aims at making foresight a social capacity, through making foresight an individual capacity developed through one's educational experience.⁷

The knowledge generating process should proceed under local control. A teacher controlled dialogue would never create new local theories based on participants' gradually improved theory creating competence.⁸

Sohail Inayatullah argues that to be effective in futures work, the futurist must be willing to play both roles ('sage on stage' and open facilitator) responsibly, at certain points leading by listening, at others leading by teaching by traditional lecture methods. Thus taking into account the multi-cultural aspects of learning.⁹ Such an approach is toward a 'strategic facilitation', involving as



many people in a foresight process in the most meaningful way as is possible, in turn helping to create capacity for foresight where it was once reserved for experts. For action research such strategic facilitation is participation with a forward view.

Social change

One of the more rigorous aspects of futures studies is its investigation of change theories through sociology, macro-history, cultural anthropology and the like. The diversity of theories in social change, and the level of complexity within the change discourse that futurists attain, make them adept at sense-making and communicating this change to others. This is clearly one of the areas in which the futures field excels. These theories, however, often only explain change and many futurists have shied away from creating change or exploring social change agency. A dual aspect in the discourse on social change is needed – knowledge of structure should be balanced with practise in agency. It is in this second aspect of social change where action research excels, working within communities or organisations to bring about meaningful results, and deriving useful knowledge from this experience for participants.

One example of a theory for social change agency coming from outside academia is *The Social Movement Empowerment Project* in San Francisco. This non-profit organisation is dedicated to supporting progressive social movements. The *Movement Action Plan*, written by Bill Moyer, outlines eight stages of successful social movements. Moyer has claimed that many activists have benefited from his lectures and framework because they have needed a roadmap that helps them to situate themselves in the change agency process, and to understand clear steps that might help them to reach their objectives. An example of an intuitive action learner, Bill Moyer built his framework from many years working within social movements, but also utilising elements from social theory, finally culminating in a ‘local theory’, one derived from the participants and for the use of the participants (activists).¹⁰

In general, futurists tend to focus on the larger scale and action researchers tend to focus on the smaller and immediate organisation, or community context. Macro-history, for instance, analyses change within a time scale of 500-1000 years (or more in some theories). Environmental scanning, a common foresight method, respects the diversity of global phenomenon. Multicultural futures look from the vantage point of civilisational ways of knowing. All these are examples of a macro-historical / planetological / civilisational approach, culminating in courses and books on global futures. Yet action researchers might feel they have little use for time scales of 1000 years if their goal is to create meaningful change in a community or organisation in a one to five year timeframe. Action researchers need to know more about a local culture, how innovations are diffused there, the intricacies of the local power structure, and other concepts that would help them to help locals better their situation. From an action research point of view, futures studies might seem too passive, overly speculative, or simply too grand a scale to be applied to action research.

I would argue a ‘meta-disciplinary’ perspective: the two approaches complement each other. Translating global insight, the forte of futures studies, into local action, the forte of action research, would seem to be a promising challenge yet social change as structure and agency are integral to each other. Foresight without action is meaningless, and action without foresight can be dangerous. Intelligence in frameworks of change would lead to better creative responses, as an



understanding of macro-history and theories in social change might help the action researchers situate themselves, and the community and organisation they are working within the grand patterns of change, leading to possibilities for action previously ignored. Seeing such grand patterns within history might allow for greater understanding of local dilemmas that might otherwise be considered eternal facts of life or unsolvable conundrums. In short, action research can be a way of applying foresight toward the aim of meaningful social change, while futures studies can be a way for action research to connect its project to the global and temporal in meaningful ways.

Knowledge creation

There are interesting developments in how the concept of scientific knowledge is evolving within the two fields. In fact, some practitioners of action research claim that they are more capable of producing valid socially scientific knowledge than the conventional social sciences. While traditional social scientists have tried repeatedly to maintain the distinction between researcher and researched, in the hope that sociological work live up to objective standards, action researchers have questioned whether such an approach produces accurate results, arguing that action research is closer to a 'true' scientific method than traditional social science in its knowledge creation process. The iterative cycle of experimentation and hypothesis, action and thought, that defines the natural science's process of validating or invalidating stated claims (and an integral aspect of disciplines such as biology and physics), is used by action research but all but ignored by conventional social science. As Greenwood writes:

...conventional social scientist's disengagement from the phenomenon they study is virtually complete. Equating this disengagement with objectivity, impartiality, and the requirements of scientific practice, these practitioners systematically distance themselves from their objects. Then, by separating science and action, they sever the connection between thought and action that permits the testing of results in the physical and biological sciences and in action research.¹¹

In futures studies the issue of scientific validation has always been problematic. This led some in the field to offer the ability to predict the future as a solution, allowing the assertion that stated claims about the future that have come true must have a science to them. In the end, scenario building eclipsed forecasting as the concept of a predictable future began to seem philosophically naïve to many. The exploration of the potentialities of an open, dynamic and evolving future, through the study of emerging issues, scenario building, and acknowledgement of human will and action as critical determinants, has distanced futures studies from what many social scientist's consider scientific thinking. Wendell Bell, for example, has taken the moral ground, claiming that it is a moral imperative of human's to exercise anticipation and responsibility for the consequences of action and in-action.¹² In addition, his critical realism addresses the propositional nature of all claims about the future, and the necessary arguability of what is deemed real living beyond subjectivity.¹³ Slaughter has argued for the symbolic and interpretive nature of futures as a cognitive and inter-subjective social construction that must be critiqued.¹⁴

One parallel in both fields in regard to scientific validity is to be found in Richard Slaughter's use of the Wilber and Edward re-conceptualisation of the scientific method. The integral cycle, based on Ken Wilber's integral agenda further modified by Mark Edwards and finally applied to futures studies by Richard Slaughter, brings together four hemispheres of knowledge into a scheme of knowledge creation and verification. Slaughter explains how knowledge can be seen to be created



in four major steps, the:

1. objective behavioural ‘injunctive strand’ in which a futures methodology is selected and applied
2. subjective intentional ‘intuitive strand’ in which the results of the work are assembled
3. subjective and cultural ‘interpretive strand’ in which the results of the study are subject to thorough interpretation
4. objective social ‘validative strand’ the results are confirmed or rejected within a public social platform.¹⁵

Within this framework, creating knowledge in futures studies is simply one example of a much larger process happening in many disciplines in forms adapted to the discipline at hand. Action research can also be seen to live within this larger framework, as its iterative cycle of action and reflection is clearly consistent with Mark Edward’s conceptualisation of knowledge creation.

The key difference between Slaughter’s and Greenwood’s frameworks, in terms of knowledge creation, is that action research demands that propositions of a social nature be verified by generating experience and creating change in a given local context.¹⁶ Futures studies, in terms such as an integral cycle, demands that propositions of a ‘forward view’ be verified through interpretation and judgement within a given foresight context, ie a community of foresight. Yet the parallels in the two approaches are significant, as both move through iterative cycles of action and reflection, rely on explicit methodology which is well documented, seek confirmation within a communal context and consider valid and relevant knowledge to live within defined local contexts – as opposed to over-generalised propositions of the universal category. Slaughter also considers a ‘forward view’ a basis for meaningful social action, a clear parallel to action research’s commitment to social research through social action.¹⁷ In addition, action research can offer futures studies a way of testing the applicability and validity of foresight within local contexts. In relation to local stakeholders, ‘knowledge about the future’ shouldn’t be an overly abstract concept lacking relevance, but rather an inspirational call to action with traction.

Systems thinking

Both fields, while not necessarily stemming from systems thinking, have come to rely on it. Whether using the soft-systems approach of Peter Checkland, the hard systems approach of Jay Forrester, or the complexity theories of the Santa Fe Institute; futurists have relied more and more on complex systems thinking to understand complex and counter-intuitive change processes, and to model these in order to make some of the assumptions within these systems explicit. In some circles complex systems thinking is a pre-requisite for constructing scenarios. Playing with the assumptions within a given model, or seeing how given systems react to various emerging issues, trends, etc. is now a common technique employed in creating alternative futures. The Club of Rome’s *The Limits to Growth* was an early example of this.

In action research as well, people and artifacts can be seen to be interlinked within an ecology of complex systems. Social systems have a history and are in constant motion, evolving through time. Humans are situated in these social systems, and these social systems influence human behaviour and are influenced by human behaviour. There is an appreciation of dynamic interaction not reducible to reified and static categories of social life and structure, a stark contrast



to orthodox social science, which is founded on social facts that stand on their own with claims to general universality. In addition to understanding social reality as a dynamic and systemic phenomenon, action research has moved toward systemic intervention, influence at a systemic level, aimed at re-creating and designing the deep ecology of social life.¹⁸ Action research can be understood as an effort to transform society into ever more open systems.¹⁹

Action research's appreciation of local systems can give futures studies more local sensitivity in its analysis of grander systems. Reciprocally, well grounded foresight can allow action research systemic intervention to relate in more detail the implications and consequence of global systems to local ones, and more sensitivity to grand temporal systems, with the testing of and iterative re-definitions of each.

Complexity

Concepts in complexity have also filtered into the language and thought of both fields, now a popular paradigm in which to work within at many institutions of foresight around the world, for example: the Budapest Futures Studies Centre in Hungary, Curtin University in Australia, the University of Houston Clear-Lake in Texas, Future Oriented Complexity and Adaption studies in Japan (FOCAS), the Australian Foresight Institute to the Finland Futures Academy, and at the University of Sunshine Coast in Australia.²⁰ Such an approach acknowledges that variables involved in understanding change are staggering enough as to make absolute certainty impossible. With human intention and action influencing 'the future', any kind of mastery over knowing change or creating change seems ridiculous.

In both fields a grounded relationship with the unknowable is very important. Action research is not rigid and prescriptive about the right course of human action and development, but more about research that empowers people to take meaningful steps in desired directions.²¹ Good foresight does not pretend to know the future or to predict the future, but rather aims at creating a meaningful 'forward view', as argued by Slaughter, that leads people to meaningful and constructive activity.

The term 'complexity', however, has many meanings. In contrast to the complex adaptive systems discourse, which leans toward an 'inter-objective' understanding of systems, Inayatullah defines complexity to be about reflexivity regarding our own perceptions, toward peripheral vision and depth understanding, 'horizontal and vertical', exploring ways of knowing and epistemological space.

Complexity requires accepting that there are many factors that explain change and that there will always be some unknown factors, partly because our knowing efforts are complicit in that which we desire to know. Complexity also assumes that the novel may emerge in our research. Our research findings thus must be open ended, ready to be discarded if a new paradigm provides more elegant, informative, explanatory insights.²²

Such a view is consonant with the 'systems' thinking of Humberto Maturana, who argues that the mind is not epiphenomenal and that 'all knowing is doing, all doing is knowing'.²³ Robert Flood writes that action research is a balance between mystery and mastery. Because the complexity and vastness of the variables that envelop our lives is boundless and beyond our capacity for comprehension, leading us to an appreciation of the unknowable:



*The human mind is both the creator and subject of complexity, not an externally appointed master over it and all its parts. That is why it makes no sense to separate action from research in our minds or in our practice.*²⁴

In both domains the quest for absolute knowledge is ending, and with this the positivist's dream of intellectual mastery. In place of this is an appreciation for the infinite complexity we are part of (and create), and a desire to understand this. It is not the hubris of intellectual triumphalism or the humble oblivion of the agnostic, but a balance between the two which allows a 'forward view' to be a call to meaningful action. Such an appreciation of complexity at the local level means that, despite futures studies understanding of global and temporal complexity, it still must 'dance' with local complexity, the unexpected and novel emerging in practice – implying open-ness, humility and a sense of mystery on the part of futures researchers to acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge in dealing with organisations and communities.

Futures visions

For many years now, futures studies has made an art form of studying visions of the future. These might include provocative images, ideal images and images of probable futures. Within this the visioning process, how a vision of the future is created, has also been of central concern. The contexts necessary for a vision to occur; what the content of a vision should be; and how to develop organisational vision, among others, have been primary questions.²⁵ Creative, intelligent and visionary responses to change have been examined in the field from the very beginnings of futures studies.

There are some parallels to this in some action research practice. Appreciative inquiry in particular is an action research methodology that leads to group visioning of preferred futures and actions toward the particular future state envisioned. The process begins by appreciating the best of what is in the community or organisation, the 'discovery' phase. The process then proceeds with participants envisioning the best of what could be, the 'dreams' phase. The participants then co-design this image of the future in more detail asking 'what should be'; this is the 'design' phase. Finally, appreciative inquiry asks and invites a wider range of participation to sustain 'what will be', the 'destiny' phase, supporting innovation and action. While there are other examples of visioning in action research, visions of the future would seem to be an outcome of collaborative inquiry, not a central concern in itself as in futures studies.

In terms of visioning, action research is relevant to foresight in opening a visioning process to many stakeholders in authentic ways, of making 'pie in the sky' visions grounded in local context and real practice. It also means that visioning is an iterative process that can never be locked-in in the way traditional strategic plans are. A vision is only as good as it is fresh, that is, meaningful and relevant to local stakeholders and macro-environmental shifts from day to day. As successive iterations in an action research process unfold, and activity such as environmental scanning, path-making, and designing redefine what is known, a vision is certain to change to become more personally meaningful, and socially relevant. Yet action researchers' concern for creating meaningful social change through open ended inquiry can be assisted by futures studies' expertise in group visioning processes and in understanding images of the future. And as argued by Jim Dator, for a particular future to be created for a society, community or organisation, it may first need to be imagined.²⁶ Similarly, an animating group vision is essential to organisational development. Peter Senge has pioneered such an understanding of the relevance of vision to organisational dynamics.²⁷



Democratic commitments

A variety of futures thinkers have articulated commitments to ‘democracy’ although by different definitions and through different means. In futures parlance this has been referred to as ‘democratising the future’, a commitment to giving all people a voice in their society’s futures, opening the discourse of a good society to broad participation. Wendell Bell, for example, has argued that one of the primary aims of futures studies is such a democratisation of the future, giving people normally outside of the decision making loop a say, and encouraging people to participate in dialogue that for many years they may have been alienated from.²⁸ The grass-roots visioning exercises and ‘futures workshops’ conducted by visionary Robert Jungk is another example of this intention to facilitate popular hope and social capacity to take action on issues that are of common interest.²⁹ Critical futures education, as developed by Richard Slaughter, also seeks to give students the intellectual futures tools to deal with future challenges and respond to social problems and complex changes that most people could not deal with or might be resigned to.³⁰

Action research also seeks to create new forms of interaction that distribute power more evenly. This cannot be done without an understanding of social systems as integrated wholes, and an analysis of existing power structures. Because of this, action research is often critical of the existing political economy and the academic structures that accompany it. Action research often sees the separation of science from reform (social change) as a form of a counter-revolutionary agenda, the creation of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ (researcher and researched) as an example of a bureaucratisation of society that leads to more stratified social hierarchies. In contrast to this stratification, action research seeks democratic inclusion and social research that ‘democratises research processes through the inclusion of local stakeholders as co-researcher’.³¹ There is no ‘subject’, but a partner in research:

*action research democratises research processes through the inclusion of local stakeholders...[and is] central to the enactment of a commitment to democratic social transformation through social research.*³²

Academic researchers, because of years of training in ‘sense making’ and creating frameworks, usually create ‘model monopolies’³³ where the intellectual frameworks or models that researchers create envelop and overpower local stakeholders. By contrast, an action researcher’s obligation is to combine their action research frameworks with the local stakeholder’s understanding of local context into a third ‘local theory’ that emerges from the co-research. Out of this process local stakeholders learn how to conduct action research on their own, furthering their own empowerment and a democratisation of the research/action praxis.³⁴ Transcending this ‘model monopoly’ would seem to a challenge in futures studies, a field heavily reliant on models and frameworks for explaining the world. Gustavsen has formulated a nine point criteria based in the philosophical thinking of Habermas that would lead toward democratic practice:

1. The dialogue is a process of exchange: points and arguments move to and fro between participants.
2. All concerned must have the possibility to participate.
3. Possibilities for participation are, however, not enough: everybody should also be active in the discourse.
4. As a point of departure, all participants are equal.



5. Work experience is the foundation for participation.
6. At least some of the experience which each participant has when he or she enters the dialogue must be considered legitimate.
7. It must be possible for everyone to develop an understanding of the issue at stake.
8. All arguments which pertain to issues under discussion are – as a point of departure – legitimate.
9. The dialogue must continuously produce agreements which can provide a platform for investigation and practical action.³⁵

Part of the project of democratising the future is to problematise existing claims about the future, or certain images of the future, and open up avenues for alternative futures and social innovation. This can come in the form of deconstruction, as in Inayatullah's causal layered analysis, or hermeneutics via Slaughter's scholarship.³⁶ Slaughter, for example, uses Habermas' distinction of cognitive interests in this way – instrumental, practical and emancipatory ways of knowing.³⁷ Critical futures studies lives within this last category, investigating power structures and critiquing images and literature on the future and past that uphold and protect de-humanising power-structures and retrogressive vested interests. Critical futures studies is clearly a challenge to the distortion of meaning within society, seeking to be an agent for human emancipation.

1. Instrumental - what is a future oriented problem, and how can we solve it?
2. Practical - how can we achieve communication and understanding regarding the future(s)?
3. Emancipatory - how has our future(s) been colonised, communication systematically distorted and how can we liberate ourselves?³⁸

Contrast how Stephen Kemmis has applied the thinking of Habermas to action research:

1. Instrumental – what is a particular problem we have as a community or organisation, and how can we solve it?
2. Practical – how can we evaluate our own work as action researchers, and see and understand ourselves in context, so that our practise is transformed for the better?
3. Emancipatory – how can we critique our social or educational work settings so that we may 'connect the personal and the political in collaborative research and action aimed at transforming situation to overcome felt dissatisfactions, alienation, ideological distortion, and the injustices of oppression and domination.'³⁹

Total systems intervention (TSI), is a branch of action research that uses a systems thinking approach. Despite coming from a different epistemological framework, it has many parallels to critical futures studies. TSI acknowledges the failure of systems dynamics to deal with many layers of systems within a given local context all at once, and uses a principle of complementarity to demonstrate 'a commitment to critical awareness and social awareness by continually raising the question, which methodologies should be used, when, and why?'⁴⁰ Four categories of organisational life are described:

1. Systems of processes – concerned with efficiency and reliability;
2. Systems of structures – concerned with functions, organisation, co-ordination and control;
3. Systems of meaning – concerned with the meaning of improvement strategies; and
4. Systems of knowledge-power – concerned with fairness in terms of entrenched patterns of behaviour.



Any one of these four ‘systems’ might become subjects of action research. The last two categories in this description resonate the strongest with critical futures studies, which examines and critiques ‘systems’ of meaning and ‘systems’ of knowledge that maintain power. While critical futures studies focuses strongly on problematising exiting systems of meaning, knowledge and structure as they relate to power within society and specifically as it relates to the determination of the future, TSI takes a similar approach into an organisational or communal environment, challenging local ‘systems’ at various levels. Critical futures and TSI share intimate interests, thus local systemic intervention could be integrated with critical futures, to critique how reified notions of the future are embedded in organisational practice, and vice versa, to show how systems in organisations maintain dystopia.

(If people experience unfairness in chosen actions, then there may be a need to do one or both of the following. Steps might be taken to emancipate privileged people from their ideologies and power structures that lead to unfair treatment for less privileged people. Also, steps might be taken to unshackle underprivileged people from dominant ideologies and power structures....The outcome is a liberating praxis that takes into account many aspects of human emancipation. ...People are less confined if actions in which they are involved are efficient rather than inefficient, and effective rather than ineffective. People are freer if actions that involve them are experienced as meaningful. And people are liberated if forces of knowledge-power are transformed, making for a fairer existence for them.⁴¹

Social innovation

Action research as a method for fostering social innovation is well documented. Examples such as the Grameen Bank micro-lending program in Bangladesh, which was created through a local action research program, abound. Likewise, futures work such as Robert Jungk and Norbert Mullert’s future workshops see social innovation as a central priority in futures studies, part of the process of democratising the future, opening alternative futures through diverse creative participation.⁴² Slaughter also sees social innovation as a primary futures studies domain, and the necessity for deep design, to re-conceptualise social reality in fundamental ways.⁴³

Foresight is central to innovation in that it gives meaning to that which ordinarily would not be meaningful due to the lack of a temporal element, ie sustainable innovation. Foresight not only offers a need and rationale for innovation through its exploration of time and creation of temporal distance, but also allows for the exploration of this distance in rigorous ways, and the testing of innovations in these futures scenarios. Strategic innovation in both the technical and social domains requires foresight. Thus action research gives futures work a way of bridging creative thinking about the future with experimentation, fostering social innovations with futures relevance. It can allow futures studies to be more than speculation about the future; deeply re-constructing social ecologies through social innovation. Foresight gives action research processes, already known for generating meaningful social innovations, enhanced futures relevance, meaningfulness in the context of alternative futures.

Synthesis

Unsurprisingly, there are already many concrete example of the integration of the two disciplines. Futures researchers, in some instances, have intuitively been doing ‘action learning’, perhaps without the heavy emphasis on documentation and review that action research requires. Many



futures educators, it also seems, have also relied on ‘heuristic’, ‘collaborative’, ‘experiential’, and ‘action-oriented’ approaches for teaching futures.⁴⁴ Likewise, some in action research seem to have used some foresight methods to further their research and ability to create meaningful action.

The search conference is a concrete example of a successful integration. In future search, a type of search conference developed by Janoff & Weisbord, participants are asked to bring news clippings of what might be emerging issues that could affect community stakeholders. Based on this initial base, the group together begins creating a time line which forks into ideal and probable futures. This divergence then becomes the bases for creating a group vision for the community and creating meaningful action.⁴⁵ In the Herbst 'dual track' search conference, participants begin by examining the positive and negative changes that have been taking place in the community from past to present. They then move on to looking at what changes are expected in the future in both positive and negative form. This then becomes the basis for formulating key problems faced by the community, and the action steps that are needed. This process of looking at historical trends and extrapolating them outwards is really classic futures studies, something which futurists have done for decades.⁴⁶ Opening this up as a participatory process is where action research comes into play.

A group of futurists from Australia have for many years been incorporating action research into futures work. Robert Burke, Tony Stevenson, Julie Macken, Paul Wildman, Sohail Inayatullah and others have for many years been developing *anticipatory action learning*, a form of foresight work done in an action learning setting. Tony Stevenson, former president of the World Futures Studies Federation writes:

*Anticipatory action learning seeks to link inquiry, anticipation, and learning with decisions, actions and evaluation, during an openly democratic process. It integrates research/search with decision and action, and downgrades the prerogative of a research elite, empowering all participants.*⁴⁷

Sohail Inayatullah has for many years developed anticipatory action learning as pedagogy in teaching foresight to students and professionals. He considers action research as the fourth and most recent epistemological advance in foresight work, after the predictive (assumes that the ‘universe’ is deterministic), interpretive (assumes the ‘universe’ is contextually given), and critical (assumes the present is the ‘victory of one particular discourse’).⁴⁸ At the University of Sunshine Coast, in Brisbane, he advises post-graduate students using this framework. He writes:

*in anticipatory action learning, the key is to develop probable, possible and preferred estimations of the future based on the categories of stakeholders. The future is constructed through deep participation. Content learning gives way to process learning. The future thus becomes owned by those having interests in that future. Moreover, there is no perfect forecast or vision. The future is continuously revisited, questioned.*⁴⁹

Conclusion

Action research and futures studies emerged and still exist in very different academic and social contexts, thus the differences within both fields make integrating the two into a new praxis challenging. Yet not only are the aims of both fields in alignment in various ways, the approach to work in both fields is often parallel. There exists a complementarity to the respective



disciplines that is hard to ignore. It promises to be a rewarding endeavour, and many have already been at work in this social innovation for years. This social innovation could help create communities of foresight, facilitate the emergence of institutions of foresight, and the democratisation of grass-roots futures. It is the possibility of 'foresight-in-action', and *action foresight*.

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Endnotes

1 Greenwood & Levin (1998) p4.

2 Wadsworth (1998 & May 2002).

3 Minzberg (1994).

4 Greenwood & Levin (2002) p112.

5 Greenwood & Levin (2002) p112.

6 While Slaughter does not explicitly use the term 'action learning', my experience of his pedagogical approach, plus his emphasis on experiential learning and his publications indicate this. For an example of this see: Slaughter, R. *Futures Tools and Techniques*, DDM/Futures Study Centre, Melbourne 1995.

7 Slaughter (1999) p289.

8 Elden & Levin (1991) p134.

9 Inayatullah (2002) pp49-60.

10 Moyer (1987).

11 Greenwood & Levin (2002) p55.

12 Bell (1997b) p86.

13 Bell (1997a).

14 Slaughter (1999) p203.

15 Slaughter (2000).

16 Greenwood & Levin (2002) p56.



- 17 Slaughter (1999) p74
- 18 Flood (2001) p140.
- 19 Greenwood & Levin (2002) p71.
- 20 Ramos (2002)
- 21 Flood (2001) p144.
- 22 Inayatullah (2002) p98.
- 23 Maturana (1987) p27.
- 24 Flood (2001) p144.
- 25 Wendy Shultz has developed facilitation methods that explore vision, see: Shultz, W. L. *Futures Fluency* 1995
- 26 A Jim Dator axiom
- 27 Elements of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* deal with this.
- 28 Bell (1997a).
- 29 Jungk & Mullert (1987).
- 30 Slaughter (1982).
- 31 Greenwood & Levin (2002) p3.
- 32 Greenwood & Levin (2002) p3.
- 33 Elden & Leven (1991) p135.
- 34 Elden & Leven (1991) p135.
- 35 Elden & Leven (1991) p136.
- 36 Inayatullah (2002) p23.
- 37 Slaughter (1999) p217.
- 38 Slaughter (1999) p217.
- 39 Kemmis (2001) Originally written as a statement by Kemmis, and used here as a question.



- 40 Flood (2001).**
- 41 Flood (2001) p141.**
- 42 Jungk & Mullert (1987).**
- 43 Lectures, Australian Foresight Institute, March 2001**
- 44 Dator (2002).**
- 45 Janoff, & Weisbord (1995).**
- 46 Greenwood & Levin (2002) p163.**
- 47 Stevenson (2002).**
- 48 Inayatullah (2002) p18.**
- 49 Inayatullah (2002) p8.**

