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Reflections

Global futures studies: evolving foundations
of a meta-discourse

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I was commissioned in 2002 by the Australian Foresight Institute, under the direction of World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) president Richard Slaughter, to conduct a global survey of all classes and courses being conducted at the tertiary level in futures studies (FS). It was Slaughter's insight that no real 'map' of the field existed, and that further development would require self-referential knowledge of the FS domain. For my own part, I have had the unique experience of studying FS, both formally and informally, at four different schools of futures located on four continents.¹ This together with the survey has given me various insights into the nature of FS education as a global phenomenon. It is these insights I wish to put forth.

In the survey, which has been open to all to examine for a number of years now, the general state and dimensions of the field are in clear view.² First, various quantitative patterns help to show the outer dimensions of the field. It is a small field, with no more than 50 places around the world where it is being taught. This, however, puts to rest assertions that there is no FS field, and in addition adds up to quite a bit of diversity, with 300 actual classes in among these approximately 50 locations. Some of these classes are marginally associated with futures studies, some are FS to the core, and most fall somewhere in between. In addition to this, the field has recently experienced a growth spurt. From 1996

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¹ Formally, I studied at the University of Houston Clear Lake as part of the summer intensive program, and completed a Master of Science in Strategic Foresight through the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University of Technology. Informally I have studied at Tamkang University in Taiwan and the Budapest Futures Centre in Hungary.

² The survey can be accessed at [http://www.swin.edu.au/afi/docs/Global%20Futures%20Studies%20Courses%20\(January%202003\).pdf](http://www.swin.edu.au/afi/docs/Global%20Futures%20Studies%20Courses%20(January%202003).pdf)

to 2002 over 150 FS classes were initiated worldwide, more than doubling the total number. Also significant, classes based in the West now account for less than half of all classes worldwide. This puts into question assumptions about FS as a purely Western phenomenon. Classes in English speaking countries only account for about 1/4 of all classes around the world. Importantly, one can only conceive of a FS field at the tertiary level by looking globally. If one were to look at one country only, there would be no field, only one or two places where work was being done in relative isolation.

One question asked by some is whether FS has a core. I've witnessed some FS teachers profess a blueprint, or in search of a holy-grail core curriculum. When I first began exploring this question I also assumed such a pattern would reveal itself. In the end, I imagined I could find the 10–15 core classes that would constitute a core curriculum FS program. After all, if we imagine ourselves in a discipline, then surely such a discipline has such a centre.

What I found led me to an unexpected understanding of the nature of the FS field. As I began to construct categories, I not only found the categories arbitrary, but they also proliferated! By the end of the exercise I had a list of about 40 unwieldy categories. This I partly attributed to my inferior skill in categorization. Yet even with rougher distinctions the diversity was undeniable.³

Looking at this list some may object to category errors and dubious distinctions. Others might be impressed that someone even bothered to do this in the first place. Because I really want to see futures studies become a part of everyday life, I thought a search for a core and generic FS would be fruitful in promoting the field. It's clear now, by contrast, that FS has evolved with each program or class reflecting the influences of the culture, environmental conditions, disciplinary backgrounds, departments and the champions

³ National/Regional/Urban/Strategic Planning and Policy formation/Regional Futures (33), FS Research methods (24), FS Introduction/generic futures/FS literature (22), thesis/research/internship/reporting/specialist seminar (14), Geo-politics and peace/defence and security/Int. relations/political economy (13), Sociology/structure/culture/social continuity/human nature (11), Epistemologies/Philosophy of foresight/models of FS (10), Sustainability/future generations/environmental science (10), Economics/finance/commerce/Economic futures/economic development (10), Systems/Complexity/modeling (9), Case studies/reports (9), Global/world futures/Club of Rome/Gaian futures/globalisation (9), History/Megatrends/evolution of international system/21C. studies/future of...X (9), Science and technology studies/tech. forecasting (9), Social Forecasts/Demographics/Statistics/survey sampling (9), Education/Vocational Futures/Future of work/leisure (8), Individual consciousness/psychology/creativity/human potential/leadership (7), Ethics/values in futures/developmental theories / religion (7), Action oriented foresight/action research/activism/social movements (7), Org. change/learning/Strategic Management/VSM (7), Critical socio-political theories of society/Critical futures/sociology of science/post-structuralism (5), Communications/information society/IT/media/knowledge economy (5), Health futures/life science/genetics (5), Scenario building/alternative futures (5), Environmental scanning/knowledge management/BI/CI/Content analysis/strategic intelligence (4), Futures education (4), Social change/historiography/macrobistory (4), Deep design/simulation (3), Professional practice/applied implementation/action learning (3), Post-colonial/multicultural/women's and gender studies (3), Law and justice (3), Anticipatory anthropology/evolutionary futures (3), Writing/journalism/foresight language and concepts (2), Utopian/dystopian literature/speculative fiction/visionary futures (2), Administration/management (1), Geography (1), Foresight facilitation methods/group processes (1), Entrepreneurship/social innovation (1), PR/Public Affairs Management (1), Risk analysis and management/risk society (1).

91 behind the various programs. Each program or class has a unique history with distinct
92 origins.

93 In this mix one can see the dominant distinctions, those in the middle and those on the
94 margins. This may reflect changing patterns in FS, either the categories in decline, or ‘the
95 Bedouins at the gates’. Overall, however, such a ‘dominant’ curriculum cannot be deduced
96 from this list. Instead we are left with tough choices amid a rich field of inquiry and
97 pedagogy. For this list does not constitute a dilemma as much as an opportunity. This list
98 of combinations and permutations, points to the ‘heart’ of FS, and perhaps its future.

99 FS has not emerged as a unitary body or discrete school, but as a higher order
100 ontological orientation to a dramatically changing world. FS is situated in a variety of
101 disciplinary backgrounds, embodying many perspectives, despite which a community of
102 interest continues to evolve. This has led to the continuing development of a ‘meta-
103 discourse’, a ‘discourse of discourses’ that finds its commonality in the mutual concern
104 and interest in the study of futures. Each distinct perspective, while coming from an
105 older discipline, acknowledges itself as part of this larger emerging field, ‘transcended
106 yet included’ by an evolving meta-discourse. In the survey this can be seen in the wide
107 ranging departments from which FS programs emerge. In Dator’s *Advancing Futures* as
108 well, a look at the disciplinary backgrounds of many of these pioneers in futures studies
109 makes it clear that it is an emerging meta-discourse between many disciplinary
110 perspectives.⁴

111 Looking at fundamental historical shifts over the 20th and into 21st century
112 (intertwined with the development of disciplines) is therefore a more fruitful way of
113 understanding the emergence of the field than looking for static reference points. As a
114 modern phenomenon, FS emerged in the last 30–40 years parallel to seismic shifts that
115 have taken place globally, both dramatic structural shifts and in the evolution of
116 consciousness and knowledge. Many of the themes that appear across the field are coupled
117 to such historical shifts.

118 The critique of positivism and a post-Kuhnian turn has led to epistemological pluralism
119 across the field. This includes an embrace by quite a few FS educators of the
120 complexity/evolutionary perspective. Post-structuralism and postmodernism also feature
121 strongly in futures studies discourse, inclusive of critical theory but closer to social theory.
122 The critical realism championed by Wendell Bell is also significant. Recent innovations in
123 Australia include Integral theory and action learning/research.

124 The development of FS is also reflected in the response to 20th and now 21st century
125 crisis and issues located at the global level, which include the problem of a nuclear world,
126 the need to envision and create futures of peace, ecological crisis, global corporate
127 plutocracy, legally and illegally organised crime, and other global issues. An analysis of
128 FS globally would show that, despite significant attention toward organisationally based
129 futures work, world affairs has an even higher priority. I certainly hope this represents a
130 historical shift toward a planetary unit of analysis and understanding, as opposed to
131 more traditional national and/or ethnocentric concerns. This theme can be seen in terms
132 such as ‘Gaian futures’, ‘meta-problem’, ‘limits to growth’, ‘civilisational challenge’,
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135 ⁴ Dator, *J Advancing Futures*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, c2002.

136 ‘global problematic’, ‘multi-dimensional challenge’, ‘teaching global issues’, ‘world
137 economic fields and visions’ and ‘civilisational dialogue’ to name a few.

138 Critiques of materialism and consumerism, and the spiritual vacuum left by modernist
139 ‘flatland’⁵ employed by the left and right of politics alike have found resonance and a
140 voice in FS. This ‘perennial tradition’ promotes the notion of human wisdom, moral
141 development, education for enlightenment, and humanistic and visionary foresight. This
142 was reflected in only a small number of FS classes in the survey and further seen in
143 *Advancing Futures*, and I hope this theme in FS becomes stronger with time. That we live
144 in a post-colonial world has seen the meaning of alternative futures evolve toward non-
145 Western futures. This is reflected in the cultural pluralisation of futures studies, reflected
146 in the post-colonial futures scholarship of Ashis Nandy, Zia Sardar, Sohail Inayatullah, Ivana
147 Mилоjevic and others; the fact that the West now has a minority of the classes in the field;
148 and the emergence of futures in Asia and Latin America.⁶ Therefore, one the most serious
149 issue we face today is the persistence of US hegemony, and the subsequent need to
150 envision a plural world order based on the needs of all people. As a global meta-discourse,
151 FS is well suited to this task.

152 Also significant has been the emergence of global civil society, and the increasing role
153 of ‘sub-politics’ in everyday life,⁷ which has in respects become the third pillar of society
154 behind government and the business sector. The WFSF has in many respects reflected the
155 development of global civil society, which will only increase in importance as an antidote
156 to runaway corporate-state collusion. The interests within the global third sector, much of
157 which embodies long term thinking, is in many ways very commensurate with the global
158 meta-discourse of futures studies.

159 The growing importance of sustainability in all aspects of life, and the revolutionary
160 implications of our new understanding of complex adaptive systems is increasingly at odds
161 with the global economy under neo-classical/neo-liberal direction. This has seen an
162 increasing link between FS and sustainability/environmental studies, and should further
163 link to needed political-economic changes. FS was born amid dramatic shifts in political
164 economy—through a cold war that straddled Marxist, Keynesian, and neo-classical
165 perspectives—but which in many respects is more closely allied to the perspective of
166 ecological economics.

167 Of course there are many more themes that can be draw out. To the degree that FS
168 mirrors fundamental shifts in human history, and addresses the needs we face in our time,
169 we can also say that FS has much to learn from the gap between what the world may need
170 and the current state of the futures studies field. FS has given much, and has much to offer,
171 but perhaps we can offer more to help people deal with the complex issues of the 21st
172 century. I believe such critical self-reflection is the way forward.

173 An assumed and un-reflected-upon stance in respect to this field is untenable because of
174 the diversity of approaches and the problematic nature of understanding futures issues
175 in the first place. A reflection on how we learn in futures studies is by default
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177 ⁵ This term was coined by Ken Wilber.

178 ⁶ An example is the emergence of a Latin American futures studies yahoo group which has quite a few members
179 and momentum <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/prospectiva/>.

180 ⁷ This term as used by Ulrick Beck.

181 a multi-disciplinary reflection across many discourses and traditions, cultures and
182 continents. Getting to a single epistemological position or methodological approach is
183 fruitless impossibility, because these stem from our ‘ontogenies’, the histories of our
184 being. Further, we need this diversity, albeit in a way that can help build the field as a
185 whole, through reflection between the many members and their perspectives in the field.
186 All our perspectives can grow through this interaction. We may not agree but we can see
187 how our views are partial and learn from other perspectives.

188 A question many ask is how we can get FS to the next stage, diffused *en masse*,
189 emerge as a mature discipline. Different pioneers in the field have taken different
190 strategies in building the field: for example Slaughter as an academic discipline, Bell as
191 a field of research, Inayatullah as praxis, Sardar as critical scholarship. I would argue
192 that self-reflection on the grounded-ness of FS discourses in time and space, on this
193 global ‘meta-discourse’, is the very foundation for the next stage of development in the
194 field. Such self-referential knowledge is the only way that we can call ourselves a
195 discipline in the first place, by acknowledging every aspect of it, in all its synergies and
196 incongruities.

197 I find talk of a global masters or doctoral program is very exciting. A global FS program,
198 however, would not only need to allow for such disciplinary diversity, but actually use it as
199 a strength. This means that such a program could be built on top of the many other
200 disciplines and perspectives from which it emerged. Such an endeavor would not strive for
201 a master plan, or generic FS, but work from disciplinary diversity to address the
202 heterogeneous challenges we face in the modern world in an appropriate way. It would
203 also avoid the strict de-markation of disciplines, by contrast finding a cooperative
204 relationship with disciplines, rather than a competitive relationship. This would see FS
205 extend and add layers of thinking and meaning to existing knowledge domains and
206 research approaches.

207 Oliver Markley has argued for coupling action research with futures research and
208 political activism. I agree, and feel we need to consciously link futures studies, political
209 leadership and communicative action. In my short time in this field, to my utter horror,
210 I’ve known of three programs partially or completely eliminated. To bring futures into
211 university education is not a simple matter of developing the curriculum, which has
212 been done again and again. It is more broadly a challenge in institutionalisation,
213 underpinned by a process of social legitimation, and subject to the political winds of
214 change that blow through departments and universities. The very legitimacy and
215 existence of FS programs is constantly being challenged. Because FS has been a victim
216 of election cycles, the hard numbers managerialism that has accompanied the neo-
217 liberal tide and general short-termism, FS needs to consciously employ a greater level
218 of political power and participation to survive and to prosper. By its very nature FS
219 leans toward the post-conventional, challenging conventional categories and assump-
220 tions, assumptions which are often held by those within the very academic institutions
221 which host these programs or classes. This field, which was built through the leadership
222 of countless pioneers and visionaries, will require a political type of FS leadership to
223 get to the next level. An understanding of communicative action may aid this, through
224 the deliberate development of the institutional legitimacy of long term thinking and FS
225 as a type of on-going, grassroots academic activism. FS does not find its action

226 instrumentally as much as through communication intensive processes, across value
227 systems, psychological positions and cultural worldviews. It is in this inter-subjective
228 space where we need to build the long term legitimacy of FS. Dialogue between FS
229 discourses can help in the development of such a ‘voice’. I hope that a greater self-
230 awareness among FS educators of the FS meta-discourse, our origins and our
231 challenges, helps us in the political task of helping the world navigate the rapids of the
232 21st century.

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