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.


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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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Dator, J Advancing Futures, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, c2002.
economic fields and visions’ and ‘civilisational dialogue’ to name a few.

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

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

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

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

An assumed and un-reflected-upon stance in respect to this field is untenable because of
the diversity of approaches and the problematic nature of understanding futures issues
in the first place. A reflection on how we learn in futures studies is by default

\(^{5}\) This term was coined by Ken Wilber.

\(^{6}\) An example is the emergence of a Latin American futures studies yahoo group which has quite a few members
and momentum http://groups.yahoo.com/group/prospectiva/.

\(^{7}\) This term as used by Ulrick Beck.
a multi-disciplinary reflection across many discourses and traditions, cultures and
continents. Getting to a single epistemological position or methodological approach is
fruitless impossibility, because these stem from our ‘ontogenies’, the histories of our
being. Further, we need this diversity, albeit in a way that can help build the field as a
whole, through reflection between the many members and their perspectives in the field.
All our perspectives can grow through this interaction. We may not agree but we can see
how our views are partial and learn from other perspectives.

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

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

Oliver Markley has argued for coupling action research with futures research and
political activism. I agree, and feel we need to consciously link futures studies, political
leadership and communicative action. In my short time in this field, to my utter horror,
I’ve known of three programs partially or completely eliminated. To bring futures into
university education is not a simple matter of developing the curriculum, which has
been done again and again. It is more broadly a challenge in institutionalisation,
derpunned by a process of social legitimation, and subject to the political winds of
change that blow through departments and universities. The very legitimacy and
existence of FS programs is constantly being challenged. Because FS has been a victim
of election cycles, the hard numbers managerialism that has accompanied the neo-
liberal tide and general short-termism, FS needs to consciously employ a greater level
of political power and participation to survive and to prosper. By its very nature FS
leans toward the post-conventional, challenging conventional categories and assump-
tions, assumptions which are often held by those within the very academic institutions
which host these programs or classes. This field, which was built through the leadership
of countless pioneers and visionaries, will require a political type of FS leadership to
get to the next level. An understanding of communicative action may aid this, through
the deliberate development of the institutional legitimacy of long term thinking and FS
as a type of on-going, grassroots academic activism. FS does not find its action
instrumentally as much as through communication intensive processes, across value systems, psychological positions and cultural worldviews. It is in this inter-subjective space where we need to build the long term legitimacy of FS. Dialogue between FS discourses can help in the development of such a ‘voice’. I hope that a greater self-awareness among FS educators of the FS meta-discourse, our origins and our challenges, helps us in the political task of helping the world navigate the rapids of the 21st century.