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# FUTURES EDUCATION AS TEMPORAL CONSCIENTISATION

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## **Abstract**

*Futures education has been around for almost four decades. Beginning in the US in the 1960s, it has now been developed in many different countries. The history of its unfolding has been well documented, for example by Richard Slaughter (2004). In Australia, considerable work has been done at the primary and secondary school level (Gidley, Bateman and Smith 2004). Even though it is a relatively new academic tradition, there are now over 50 universities around the world that teach futures studies (Ramos 2005). Some are just one or two classes at the bachelors level, brought into a university by an enthusiastic professor. Others incorporate futures studies into existing programs, for example in the areas of planning, business, environmental sustainability, economics, development studies, science and technology studies. There are also formal Masters level programs, with degrees entitled such as: futures studies, strategic foresight, prospective (in France), prospectiva (in Latin America), and prognostics (in Eastern Europe). There are also numerous doctoral dissertations around the world with a focus in futures studies.*

*Contributing to this debate, the approach to futures education in this article will consider Freire's (1970, 1973) work on conscientisation in the contexts of critical futures studies and, further, discuss some potentials of Freirian-style action research in futures studied. This framework offers practical and theoretical possibilities in futures education toward the development of democratically-oriented consciousness and the real issues and challenges we face as communities and as humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

## **Critical Futures Studies**

Critical futures studies was pioneered by many of the core members of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF), which emerged in the 60s from the older critical traditions of Europe and the emerging emancipatory / post-colonial traditions of the newly liberated non-West. Notable examples of this include Robert Jungk's early pioneering of 'Futures Workshops' in Europe, and Ashis Nandy's early involvement in the WFSF (Ramos 2005). Critical futures studies evolved further through cultural studies and post-structuralism. Slaughter (1999)

developed the first articulation of how ideology is expressed through futures research. He also later developed a typology for futures work based on its level of reflexivity: pop futures, problem oriented, and critical / epistemological (2004, 89). Inayatullah (2004) later pioneered post-structural futures analysis through the development of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), a framework for deconstructing futures discourses and images and reconceptualising them through alternative frames of reference. Sardar (1999) championed a multi-cultural approach to futures studies, which critiques forms of cultural imperialism and affirms the need for cultural autonomy.

At a basic level critical futures education aims at helping the learner to understand how discourses and popular images of 'the future' are mediated by culture, ideology and worldview; or how we project our institutional and cultural assumptions, ideology, and worldviews onto / into futures research, images and discourses. At a deeper level it asks how we can know the future, problematising the empirical standard, opening up alternatives frames and epistemological questions. It asks how media (in many forms) privilege or marginalised certain futures over others, or reveal deeper structures. Finally, it aims to pluralise the future, showing how there are alternatives futures embedded in the present.

Critical futures studies uses corollary and often overlapping categories such as ideology, worldview, and teleology to help uncover how futures discourses and images are framed from different cultural traditions. The notion of Ideology may refer to powerful intellectual and social movements, the various '-isms' that pervade the world. Inayatullah argues worldviews are shared 'actor invariant' cultural configurations that help determine the way we see the world, positioned in space and time (2002,117). They vary, for example, from: The UK of Charles Dickens, to Tang Dynasty China, to the Afghanistan of the Taliban, or the USA of George Bush Jr. Teleology refers to the construction of historical endpoints and determined paths of development. The following section will show how these categories are applied.

## **Critical Futures Education Applied**

Watkins' (1964) study found that most modern ideologies have three fundamental characteristics: 1) they are utopian, promising a future that can never be fully

realised; 2) they oversimplify reality, especially through the construction of friend and enemy, hero and villain, self and Other, and finally 3) they embody extreme optimism and over-confidence in their capacity to actualise their cause. From this it can be inferred that the influence of different ideologies on our views of the future are great. For this reason they are widely used in futures education settings. For historian-turned futures educator Warren Wagar, ideology not only mediates the construction of the past, but also how we see futures. It is for this reason that he stresses the use of ideologies in constructing scenarios with students (2002, 88), to show how different ideological positions construct qualitatively different views and orientations towards the future. These positions may include: market fundamentalist, Marxist, eco-feminist, technological optimists and religious fundamentalists. Such an approach helps students get past false dualisms that obscure a deeper understanding of futures issues. Cole (2002) on the other hand, uses ideological grouping to teach a course on global planning, demonstrating how different ideologies organise variables / data differently in projecting futures.

In another instance, Jacques Boulet, at a seminar I attended in 2003 at Borderlands Co-operative in Melbourne, pointed out certain ideological asymmetries in relation to consumerism.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the emergence of consumerism coincides with the rapid depletion of the

Earth's natural resources. This has been described by Sklair as the 'culture-ideology of consumerism' and by Hamilton (2003) as part of a 'growth fetish'. Sklair argues that this 'culture-ideology' is exported from the West to the non-West through Trans-national Advertising Agencies (TNAAs), and employs 'projective advertising', 'the technique of producing new needs/wants as components of a new lifestyle' (Sklair 2002, 182). So while expectations for one's individual life rise and rise, the Earth's capacity to fulfil such expectations falls and falls.<sup>2</sup>

Sardar argues the future has already been colonised by the corporate ideology of globalisation. It is, in his words, 'occupied territory'. Because futures research and / or consulting, coupled with marketing, is very big business, 'forecasting simply ends up by projecting the (selected) past and the (often-privileged) present on to a linear future' (Sardar 1999, 9). As Sardar shows, teleology is an essential aspect of ideology. Teleologies tell us what 'the end of history' is, or offer a grand design. The western development model, which still encourages all countries to follow in the example of the West, with categories such as 'First World / Developed', 'Second World / Developing' and 'Third World / Under-developed' is an example of teleology. Variation is possible, but the path is fundamentally set. Hard teleology might correspond to a strict historicism.

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Such teleological determinism offers a static version of reality which presents the present as unchanging and 'the end of time' or the future as unitary and determined, outside of human intervention.

This western development narrative, promising progress and material success for all, exists in a larger context of the western *Weltanschauung*. According to Sardar, most attempts in the West to rethink development still fall into a worldview that only accepts macro-economics and the logic of the market as the basis for dealing with development, and take western values, such as profit maximisation and competitive individualism for granted. He argues that, if the whole model is flawed, we will not be able to create a just economic order by just tinkering with 'development' (2003, 316). As well, Finish environmental policy and futures educator Markku Sotarauta acknowledged the western enlightenment derived worldview that informs current notions of development, and the need to shift toward a more flexible model of policy making and planning informed by multiple worldviews and diverging views of the future (Sotarauta 2002, 217-221).

### **Mediating Consciousness**

Like much of global and environmental education, critical futures studies is also an example of socially critical education aimed at addressing ecological unsustainability and societal inequality (Hicks 2002, 322). Critical futures education challenges business-as-usual conceptions of change, surfacing both the ideological distortions about the future and the critical challenges we face, explicitly incorporating ethics. Such critical futures education, however, needs to extend into a new media literacy, which can empower students within the endless symbolic webs characteristic of our hyper mediated world, as it is often through the media that the future is 'colonised'.

While calls for a new media literacy have been around for a while (Ewan 1976), futures studies media literacy has only been explicitly developed by some (see Henderson 1996; Slaughter 1999, 95; Inayatullah 2004). Today's media is often complicit in perpetuating false assumptions about the future, which insulate people from facts, evidence, and knowledge needed for people to make wise decisions. Two examples illustrate this: global warming and weapons of mass destruction. First, climate change research has upset our assumption that the Earth's climate is relatively stable, and we now understand that climate change is both part of the Earth's regular oscillations and also created by carbon emissions. TV programs on the impact of climate change or 'peak oil' issues, however, number very few, as do ads telling us to sell our cars and ride bikes. Yet we get literally thousands of ads telling us to buy more cars. A second example is the marketing of the so-called 'war on terror', a term which conveniently obfuscates the US's role in

the production and implementation of terror. From this perspective the state-media propagation of the concept of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' (WMD) leading up to the US invasion of Iraq can be seen as a case of 'rotten foresight'. While the existence of WMD is certainly an important one to deal with, the framing of the issue is distorted. This construction of false assumptions about the future can also be seen in the context of George Lakoff's research into 'framing', how public relations style media saturation is fundamental to notions of everyday common sense (Lakoff 2004).

Through the media, the future is also often portrayed in extremes (Slaughter 2004, 15-16). It is often either dystopian, apocalyptic films and Philip K. Dick scenarios (for example *BladeRunner* / *Minority Report*) where corporations and technology have run wild, or a techno-utopian world where the march of progress has lead us to material bliss. Haunted by the possibility of catastrophe, or compelled by the wish fantasy of technological transcendence, the public imagination has been moulded into either false despair or false promises. In one respect, both techno determinism and catastrophe consciousness essentially do the same thing – they tell us that power is outside us, that either way, we only participate passively in the unfolding of time. As Paulo Freire argued, 'In alienated societies, men oscillate between ingenuous optimism and hopelessness' (Freire 1973, 12-13).

The increasingly oligopolistic mass media are one of the key forces through which the future is colonised. Processes which pacify people, turning them into powerless recipients of a pre-packaged future, indicate this colonisation. Entertainment is a key method, a much more effective pacifier than indoctrination - people are more likely to resist indoctrination, sensing a threat associated with coercion. Individuals being entertained will enjoy the experience, and are less likely to resist it. Another good barometer of whether the future has been colonised is to ask whether people have hope.

The future has been colonised where people feel they have no power to change the conditions of their lives. Extensions of this are arguments for inevitability: of poverty, of war, of human evil, etc. An internalisation of inevitability is a reifying of social conditions, which leaves people in a condition of alienation from themselves and the world. To justify dehumanisation, the domination of others, putting individuals in competition in a zero sum game, civilisations clashing or humans pitted against nature, are all examples of colonised futures. The end result is oppression manifested through a sense of futility. It is a sad belief that we cannot change things, or a sense of paralysis in the face of challenges, a state of hopelessness and despair. We thus need a renewed sensitivity to the media contexts in which we find ourselves, especially in respect to our futures. We need

to ask whether our media contexts empower or disempower, aid or hinder us in our quest for better, hopeful futures.

### **Temporal Conscientisation**

Temporal conscientisation refers to a liberating awakening in relation to temporality, with various dimensions. Intellectually it is the awakening of what Freire referred to as 'critical consciousness', and in relation to the future, critical futures thinking. It is also an understanding of alternative futures, that the future is not predetermined, but open to human influence. Psychologically it is an existential shift, finding empowerment and hope. Practically it means learning to embody the future in the present, through new practices, innovations and actions.

If colonisation means we have internalised a hopeless and despairing future without alternatives, given to us by impersonal others, liberation means quite the opposite. Liberation in this context means first identifying forms of false consciousness, ideology and worldviews, as they relate to the future, including delusional forms of hope, and visions of the future which are alienating. Examples are varieties of fundamentalism, for example, which put faith completely outside us, such as techno-fundamentalism (technology will save us), econo-fundamentalism (progress equals economic growth), and religious fundamentalism (only God can save us). It means personally co-generating empowering alternative futures in relation with others through the liberation of the imagination.

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world, from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform (Freire 1970,34).

As Freire (1970, 33) argued, we needed 'to make oppression and its causes objects of reflection' by those being oppressed. By making false futures, techno-fantasies and dystopias of despair alike, objects of reflection, we can understand their causes, and act to create new empowering directions. De-colonising the future starts with a reflection on the moulding of our imaginations, and follows through by shifting the locus of control away from corporate / state institutions, and toward citizens and community, with the corresponding local capacity to develop innovations that empower. This is certainly challenging, but there are numerous practical examples of people responding to the great issues of our time through imaginative social innovations, proposals and visions (see Henderson 1996; Ramos 2004).

Temporal conscientisation means becoming sensitive to 'epochs' the unfolding of history and contemporary social change processes. Freire argued that in order for people to meaningfully participate in changing their realities for the better, people need to be

able to distinguish themselves from the forces of history (Freire 1973,5). A better future can be fulfilled to the extent that historical trends, issues and themes are grasped by people. For Freire critical consciousness meant awakening to the key themes of the time, and thus being able to intervene 'actively in reality, to humanise and transform it' (1973, 7). This corresponds to many methods used in futures education, such as trend and emerging issues analysis, as well as the study of historical stages, emphasised in part by Galtung and Inayatullah (1997). Moreover, the person as 'object' is characterised by passive adaptation to oncoming social changes, passively acquiescing and in the process becoming de-humanised through their passive acceptance of historical forces. The person who is a 'subject', is characterised by integration, both adapting to and transforming the epoch, in the process humanising themselves and others (Freire 1973).

Key for Freire was to distinguish the epoch in exhaustion as opposed to the epoch which gives sustenance (1973, 9). Slaughter and Beare (1993) reiterate this understanding when they write: 'to educate young people as though the present patterns of thinking and living, or past ones for that matter, provide a sound basis for confronting the future is quite plainly dangerous' (1993, 7). In resonance with Freire, they contrast the paradigm in decline and exhaustion as industrial materialism. The new emerging paradigm they describe as a one-world view of global consciousness, characterised by an appreciation for the intimate inter-connection of systems that interpenetrate on Earth, ecological, human, and inanimate.

### **Alienation and Healing**

Educator David Hicks helps to draw the link between knowledge about global futures, empowerment and action as part of a process of temporal conscientisation. Drawing upon previous research as well as his own experience as an educator, he identifies the psychological process experienced by students of global futures education (Hicks 2002). He shows how learning about global futures triggers a distinct psychological process in a student. The five stages in this process proceed from *cognitive*, *affective*, *existential*, and *empowered*, to *action* (Hicks 2002, 100).

In this first 'cognitive' stage students intellectualised the dimensions of global futures, global issues and challenges. As the student progresses, frustration often ensues with the complexity of the issues, in addition to sadness, worry, and anxiety over the state of the world. This constitutes the 'affective' stage. This often leads to a re-assessment of the student's own place in the world. The assumptions students have about their own lives are challenged. This 'existential' stage is the potential turning point, where students begin to integrate

their concerns about global futures into their own lives. The 'empowerment' stage is where students find sources of inspiration, innovation and renewal that give them a sense of hope, motivation and new directions. Finding inspiring examples and stories of change is key. In the last stage, 'action', students find new relationships, networks, practices, behaviours and projects which address their concerns about global futures.<sup>3</sup>

The process of healing the alienation that people experience with the current state of the world should be emphasised. Hicks argues that much of the angst of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century stems from our being 'cut off' from the natural world. Repression and denial of the state of the world are characteristic of the vast majority of people. As Hicks writes:

Some problems are too much to bear so that we deny their very existence. Our defence mechanisms can thus lead to a 'psychic numbing' which denies the pain of the world and our part in producing it. By denying its existence we perpetuate it (Hicks 2002, 99).

Jennifer Gidley (2004) has conducted extensive research on the link between futures education and youth empowerment. She shows how futures in education has been used to help counter fears that youth have about the future, 'helping students develop greater sense of hope and possibility,' and to explore avenues for action (Gidley 2004, 21). She also cites evidence suggesting that facilitating positive images of the future for youth is effective in dealing with depression and even lowering the incidence of suicide among youth (2001). The research links hopelessness with helplessness, 'the inability to control outcomes, whether good or bad,' (Gidley 2001, 52), in other words, a lack of power / agency. Agency then may be considered a primary outcome of empowerment. She emphasises how futures education, and visioning processes for youth, need to be linked with opportunities for action.

Brainstorming actions that could be done as a class, now and in the future...empower the students – without it futures research with young people may have a depressing effect, because they can't see how their dreams can become a reality (Gidley 2004, 22).

Conventional education fails to bring these dimensions into the learning process so that students can both face our complex (often frightening) futures *and* find empowerment and action. At one extreme education focuses on human empowerment without acknowledging hard core social issues. At the other extreme education often gives people a heavy dose of hard core social issues without enabling them to find hope, inspiration, and empowerment that leads to new actions, practices and innovations. As Freire argued, there needs to be a continuous dialectic between the subjective experience of the individual, and the objective conditions people find themselves in (1970, 35):

Nascent hope coincides with an increasingly critical perception of the concrete conditions of reality' (Freire 1973, 13).

### **Anticipatory Action Learning**

Linking foresight with action, through empowerment, is the essence of anticipatory action learning (AAL). AAL, an empowerment oriented and capacity building approach to futures exploration and education, is a combination of action research / learning and critical futures studies. The term was first seen in an article by Julie Macken for the Australian Financial Review, and originally developed into a practice by Tony Stevenson and Sohail Inayatullah (Ramos 2004, 500). AAL is primarily participatory, involving groups of people working together. As such the aim is to bring together many stakeholders with common concerns, but with distinct perspectives and different 'ways of knowing'.

Instead of an 'expert' telling a group what the future is, a facilitator helps a group design processes that allow them to skill themselves in futures exploration. By using various techniques, such as trend and emerging issues analysis, Causal Layered Analysis, visioning, back-casting and social innovation design, they embark on a process of temporal conscientisation. Through this, a dialectic exists between understanding the empirical / material factors that impinge on the future, and an understanding of the core assumptions, myths, ideology and group values and aspirations in relation to their future.

Reflection on how the future has already been framed or colonised, or what worldview gives the default future, allows stakeholder-participants to re-conceptualise their futures in empowering ways, through new and inspiring narratives. Finally, the process leads to group formulated plans and actions for realising the desired future. Inayatullah (2005) has developed the most comprehensive account of this practice. In addition, AAL and related approaches incorporating action research into futures studies has proved its suitability for use in many settings, documented through various case studies.<sup>4</sup>

The theoretical backdrop of AAL is action learning / research and experiential learning, or learning through action. While each practitioner draws upon futures and action research traditions differently, Kolb (1984) provides a classic model of what experiential learning looks like: proceeding from [1] concrete experience, to [2] observation and reflection, to [3] abstract conceptualisation, and finally to [4] experimentation. While this is a general outline of the process, learning can begin at any stage, and moving through one cycle does not complete the learning process, it is but one of many iterations in a larger learning spiral. This approach implies shifting from a success / failure mindset, typical of absolutistic thinking, to a more nuanced mindset of experimentation. This allows us to become self-conscious

actors / interveners in life in modest yet ever more meaningful, empowered and effective ways.

### Conclusion

Creating education for empowering, hopeful and livable futures is today a fundamental challenge. To do this we first need to reflect upon how 'the future' has been framed, ideologically, through the worldviews we hold, and how the future is shaped by the media. At the level of human subjectivity, this corresponds with emancipation from fixed and deluded futures consciousness, an enhanced understanding of historical shifts and, through finding new sources of hope, some healing of our sense of alienation from the world. Finally we need to integrate futures education / learning with actions, innovations and enterprises that can practically lead to better futures. By bringing together critical futures studies and action research, we can better understand and employ processes of temporal conscientisation, how we integrate ourselves in time, helping to lead us toward more peaceful, ethical and sustainable futures.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> From a seminar on social futures in 2003 at Borderlands Co-operative in Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> These stage are of course not linear, but can also double back recursively, depending on the type of futures education and the students involved.

<sup>4</sup> Two special issues on the confluence of action learning / research and futures studies, edited by Sohail Inayatullah and myself, in the *Journal of Futures Studies* (August 2005), and also for *Futures* (forth coming 2006), have brought together 15 authors and dozens of case studies in its application.

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### Bio

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### Migrants

Do you miss us-the generation  
 who took our suitcases and left,  
 those of us who were then thirty?  
 We were many, too young  
 but also too old and complicated-  
 too late to stay, too late to migrate.

Is there a void where now  
 the forty year olds are missing,  
 or, as soon as we left, the space was filled  
 by waves of generations, by the tides of many-  
 the ocean of genetics regenerating gaps  
 wave after wave after wave?

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