

Anticipatory action learning: conversations about the future

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2006



Pergamon

FUTURES

www.elsevier.com/locate/futures

Essay

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Futures 34 (2006) 417–425

Abstract

This paper proposes experimenting with *anticipatory action learning* for helping to create the future. It is an interactive process that relies strongly on a central thread of conversation among a variety of participants, from multiple perspectives, concerned with the social unit or project. Basically, anticipatory action learning is action research modified for foresight. It integrates research/search with decision and action, and downgrades the prerogative of a research elite, empowering all participants. Conversation allows meaning from a range of different worldviews to be shared and negotiated for studying, theorising and otherwise engaging the future—and more importantly, for helping to create it. Criteria are proposed for anticipatory action learning and procedural and administrative limitations are addressed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

The visions we have about our own futures vary according to the mindset each of us stands in. It would be fascinating to compare the personally envisioned futures of everyone at an international meeting of futurists. Our futures should converge in some way where we share common interests as futurists, and diverge on the point of intercultural variety. But, would they differ from each other as widely as those of Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese generals?

It would be even more telling to compare the range of alternative futures envisioned by world leaders with the visions of their constituents and especially, say, with the visions of a woman in Africa's Central Lakes region and of the homeless in Osaka.

In a similar way, the means of engaging the future in order to study it, and its

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uncertainties, and the way people think about it, are variously dependent on the mindsets of the scholars and researchers, and the realities they find themselves in. Methodologies of futures studies range across the predictable: from empirical quantitative projection (linear and non-linear); to qualitative interpretation and critical analysis; and to participatory action research or its associate, action learning.

Then, futures studies differs according to the disciplinary framework of the researcher, whether in physics, ecology, complexity science, social science and the humanities, critical cultural theory or philosophy. Further, there is the division of the pragmatic and academic perspectives.

Actually, the very fact of having a formal methodology is itself derived from a dominant civilisational and ethical perspective, mainly Western.

There is another important distinction in futures studies. On the one hand, there is the perspective from which futurists research, analyse and critique the future, or more precisely what other people think and say about the future. On the other, there is the perspective from which people in the focal social unit may think and act to create their own futures.

Then, acting to create a future poses at least two further distinctions depending on whether one believes the future is structurally preordained, or whether human interaction and intervention play a significant part.

It is from the perspective of participative human agency acting to create one future or another, at least partially, that this paper proceeds.

Before going further, let us address the question of whether future-creating can rightly be claimed to constitute the *study* of the future, or *future studies*. If it is not part of futures studies, then at least future-creating activity does rely on input from the field, the results of studying and reflecting on alternative options for the future—futures, plural. Whatever way we look at creating the future, as opposed to merely researching data about it, the activity does represent a fairly direct, personal engagement of the future, as much as anyone can do about a time–space that has yet to arrive. This is an important distinction, since many empirical futures studies do not so directly engage the future, well not personally. Rather, they examine stated opinions of others about future options, and other people's preferences, emerging issues and the like, themselves all valuable activities.

If, as Michel Godet has said, '...the future is not written anywhere and has still to be built...' [1], creating the future is a central activity which at least deserves full consideration by the field of futures studies, especially if it relies on the analysis and critique of data generated or accessed around the activity itself.

1. Democratising the future

Creating the future can be controlled by the wealthy, powerful and famous, and their minders and lackeys. But in the spirit of democracy, future-creating would seek to ensure that people who have a stake in the future, either through their likely habitat there, or their successor generations, should be able to participate

in that creation. This does not happen with the more traditional methodologies of futures studies, where experts stand aside from the vast majority of other citizens.

A methodology, a procedure even, that permits such participation can generically be termed as *participatory action research*. It allows relative freedom from structure and process to encourage invention and more diverse exploration of the perspectives and issues than are often allowed with any other single methodology. In fact, participatory methods usually employ a range of other methodologies, to input data for analysis and critical reflection.

But participation is not without its limits, which could be why so much futures work is done by experts. We have limited opportunities, in even the most so-called democratic societies, for participation in action research by more than a chosen handful of people. It is therefore not surprising that most action research happens within small, discrete communities, be they villages, classrooms, or even prisons.

In fact, participative activity is valued less highly than adversarial competition, and this could be a good argument against its use. It can be threatening to the controlling elite. But have we given it a fair trial?

2. Learning to participate

Whatever, we should not be blind to the problems of action research, flagged elsewhere: [2], including:

- the difficulty of finding participants willing and able to engage in protracted and intense inquiry, including particularly the people who hold power and decision authority;
- the difficulty of building mutually inclusive communication frames of meaning between participants, including the experts and others; and
- the necessity to maintain vigilantly the distinction between action that advances open inquiry and decision, and instrumental action for its own sake.

Participatory methods also require careful attention so that the participants who are actively most vocal or articulate, and experienced in such processes, do not block out people who are more passive. This requires sound moderation or facilitation of the discussion processes.

Further, there is the difficulty of uninformed opinion from the lay people who participate, as compared with the experts. Care needs to be taken to encourage equitable, active participation by those with the competence as well as those with the right to help change their own social situation, their own future. Experts should be prepared to help other citizens understand and access specialist information needed to inform the discussion, another responsibility for the skilled facilitator. With participatory processes, there is not the usual separation of the expert researcher from those being studied, or those wanting to learn from the results of the study. All should be full participants, including the experts.

Despite these barriers, and there other administrative matters to be addressed later, I will argue for serious experimentation with a type of informed, democratic participation in futures creation, termed here *anticipatory action learning*. It builds on action research, and forms of participatory action learning, calling in the dimension of anticipation and foresight.

3. Anticipatory action learning

Anticipatory action learning seeks to link inquiry, anticipation and learning with decisions, actions and evaluation, during an openly democratic process. The communication style needs to be what Lee Thayer [3] once called *diachronous*, as opposed to *synchronous*. By diachronous Thayer means that the goals and the means for achieving them are decided during the participation process itself. With synchronous or top-down communication, the goals and the means are imposed before the participation begins.

Anticipatory action learning, as proposed here, borrows from the seminal concepts of Morgan and Ramirez [4]. They see action learning as holographic, as a means of developing capacities for people to investigate and understand their own situations, and to go further, to decide and act within an ongoing social context.

This stands in contrast to the approach of more conventional methodologies where research seeks primarily knowledge and understanding. Important as these needs are, they can be taken out of their social context into that of the expert researcher.

As with Morgan and Ramirez, anticipatory action learning needs to meet certain criteria. It should be democratic, multilateral and pluralistic. It needs to empower and be proactive, linking individual with social transformation. Thus, it would integrate different levels of understanding in an evolving and open-ended way. In this sense, creating intelligent and humane action is more important than contributing to formal knowledge.

I would change this slightly, first by saying that it should be *anticipatory* and *interactive*, or *preactive*, rather than *proactive*. What is envisaged is a collaborative, anticipatory activity. The term “proactive” most often suggests a determinism that I doubt is intended by Morgan from his successive writing. Proaction is a notion that has been appropriated by *can-do* marketing, among others, to impose preordained change.

Second, I would prefer to use the term *coevolutionary*, again to stress pluralistic mutual adjustment, since one criticism of evolution suggests it is still based in a *progressive determinism*.

Simply put, anticipatory action learning is a matter of taking one of the many well-developed action learning processes, such as that of Peter Checkland [5], and adding the anticipatory component. In such a case, it is important that the spirit and integrity of exploring alternative futures be observed.

4. Beyond planning

Anticipatory action learning differs from much of the scenario planning that happens today, even if conducted in a participatory way. There needs to be more deliberate attention to exploring a full range of alternative futures, from the probable to the possible, the preferred to the undesirable, not forgetting the futures that are not easily seen from a conventional mindset. Scenario planning still tends to extrapolate from the past more than work back from the future. Anticipatory action learning does use trend analysis for suggesting certain alternative futures, but seeks to *backcast* from future visions to infer the actions along the way, including the first steps to be taken in the present.

Characteristics of the process, include:

- Identifying the people who will take part in the activity, hopefully as many of the social unit as possible, and inclusive of as many views as possible.
- Defining the scope of the anticipation.
- Collaboratively agreeing on what is to be explored and how, during the process itself, not as preordained objectives.
- Collecting data, via an appropriate variety of methods and procedures, with agreement on who gathers what.
- Analysing and critically deconstructing the data, with particular attention to the consequences of trends and changes.
- Developing alternative futures, scenarios or visions (plural).
- Reflecting on the alternative futures envisioned.
- Deciding which futures to prevent and which to pursue actively.
- Developing actions for participants to create preferred futures.
- Re-evaluating early action.
- Reiterating the process.

Conversation lies at the very core of anticipatory action learning. It allows meaning from a range of different worldviews to be shared and negotiated for studying, theorising and otherwise engaging the future—and more importantly, for helping to create it. Since conversation is usually face-to-face, it allows for immediate feedback, verbal and otherwise, and revision of thought among participants, a critical aid to reaching understandings.

However, my friends in the Philippines, for example, remind me that oral communication is not valued as highly as performance arts in some communities. Thus the use of conversation as a methodology is culture bound, as with any other.

Where used, the conversation needs to proceed openly, in a spirit of collaboration and tolerant pluralism, without demanding that people compromise their beliefs, but helpfully and supportively challenging long-held assumptions.

There should be a wide variety of participants, representing the main perspectives of the social unit for or about which the anticipation is being conducted. The facilitator needs to beware the tendency within groups, where members get used to each other, to lapse into convergent thinking, *groupthink*.

Conversation can construe a community of diverse meanings, so that each understands more clearly the others' points of view. But when conformity sets in, it can drastically act against exploration and innovation.

5. Freeing the mind

Human groupings show a tendency to stay in the conventional wisdom, or slip back into it for comfort, whether in small groups or the wider society. Scott Burchill [6] suggests that defining the 'spectrum of permitted expression is a highly effective form of ideological control', even in so-called free societies.

He evokes George Orwell's warning in *Animal Farm* [7] that, in a democracy, an orthodoxy is a body of ideas which it is assumed all '...right-thinking people will accept without question...'. Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself (sic) silenced with surprising effectiveness.

More work needs to be done on how to encourage divergent thought in conversation to ensure that a range of alternative future options emerges, including some off-the-wall thinking. One suggestion that can be helpful is to ensure a range of different perspectives is present.

As with participatory processes, conversation has its limitations and problems.

The act (or is it art?) of conversation is often discounted, even ridiculed, in contemporary scholarly inquiry perhaps because it appears to lack the formality of structure and process that characterise most traditional methodologies. Is this because we take conversation for granted, and have not adequately studied it, or because we intend respectfully to value the systematic methodological processes we spend so much hard time mastering in the academy? Or are both factors at work? The answers beg further research elsewhere.

6. Reimagining conversation

In a series of broadcast talks, historian Theodore Zeldin [8] argues for the value of conversation, in certain forms, though neither specifically for research—nor, perhaps more accurately, for futuring; for *search*. The kind of conversation he is interested in begins with a 'willingness to emerge a slightly different person'. The really big scientific revolutions have been the invention not of some new machine, but of new ways of thinking, as with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

But can an individual expect to have an impact on other than oneself, if the world is controlled by powerful economic and political forces, as we see in the new *globalisation*? Does that justify not trying?

Zeldin points out that revolutions such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment are not the inventions of some machine but of the ways we talk about things. To him, the world is made of 'individuals searching for a partner, for a lover, for a guru, for God'. But he calls for a new conversation that develops equality, opening up to each other in an entirely natural way. And further, 'we need a new

kind of novel and film to create visions of how people can live together as equals, with humour’.

It seems that conversation can aid the search for a compelling image of the future, which, if we follow Johan Galtung, can be a potent force for change.

Compelling images can be constructed autocratically or democratically. If the process is democratic, it allows the unbridled negotiation of meaning in order to construct images or visions in a collaborative way. It allows people to generate understandings that help them act in their own situation.

Thus anticipatory action learning, incorporating conversation as it does, partly systematic *and* open, should ideally enable a rich exploration of a range of visions of the future from multiple perspectives, including the undesirable. There is nothing likely to be so compelling as the obverse of the undesirable future.

7. Global multilogue

An example of the use of conversation for exploring alternative futures can be found in UNESCO’s *21st Century Dialogues* in Paris, in September 1998. Compared with anticipatory action learning, the UNESCO event represented a relatively more ceremonially moderated use of conversation in global futures studies. The dialogues did not intentionally use action learning or action research, although that does not say the event was not thoughtfully designed.

The UNESCO experience did show how the process of human dialogue—or better, *multilogue*—as an alternative to more formal methodologies, becomes problematic because of our epistemological distances from one another. Such distances are the result of often dramatic variations in culture, language, gender, history, attitudes towards subjectivity, objectivity and intersubjectivity, and our understandings and misunderstandings of the future.

Conversation, especially when multicultural and interdisciplinary, also poses a dilemma. While cultural, linguistic and epistemological diversity ideally allow a rich array of perspectives on issues about the future, and thus a plurality of meanings, the very difference in perspectives contributes to difficulties in understanding each other. We only have to look at other cultures’ metaphors to realise this. And conversation which starts with the clean slate of a relatively distant future, say 50 or more years ahead, is not immune to conflict, even psychological and other forms of violence—interinstitutional and interpersonal.

Events such as the *21st Century Dialogues* will most likely be replicated in a variety of forms as we settle into a new “millennium”, unless futures interest has faded with millennial madness. In such dialogues, futurists would have an ideal opportunity to experiment with inclusive multicultural conversations as the means of navigating and negotiating through the differences that result from our divergent thoughts and proposals. But discrimination needs to be minimised against participants who do not speak or understand the main international languages.

Other things that need to be taken into account when facilitating conversation are the structure, including the setting, and the process of conversation. Relative

lack of structure, with minimum control of process, now sits quite comfortably with many people from American and Australian cultures, for example, while Russians and East Asians demand mandated structure and process. Timetabling, seating, ambience and allowing for the inarticulate to participate are also considerations.

These requirements vary according to one's cultural experiences and we need to experiment with ways to make people comfortable and to encourage their participation in open conversation when they come from a variety of backgrounds, including those that have experienced severe oppression. A big, echoing assembly hall with theatre-style seating is no longer necessarily the ideal venue for certain contemporary global citizens. But then again, it is for others, and we are still building plenty of such halls.

8. Questioning the future

Conversation, also, needs to encourage the asking of questions, as well as the advocacy of ideas and ideals. It seems important, too, that we find new questions to ask, not simply the same, tired questions founded in the much-discussed issues derived from well-identified problems and categories often determined by academic disciplines and other vested interests.

21st Century Dialogues did ask some important new questions, such as: what is the new social contract for the third industrial revolution and accompanying globalisation? We need more such questions, especially about emerging issues—those that are not yet in common currency—across a variety of categories, civilisational perspectives, worldviews and images of the future, especially long-term.

One question for futurists is: how do we ensure adequate, inclusive or democratic participation in global conversations about the future when the planet is so vast and culturally diverse?

Perhaps futurists need to become activists more than they already are, to step outside the academy more often and to go beyond merely esoteric writing. Futurists may need to become active advocates for the use of anticipatory action learning, or other participatory futures-creating processes, in real-life situations. As well, futurists may need to speak out more as public intellectuals in order to initiate and enrich public conversations about emerging issues and alternative futures.

Certainly, further research is recommended on how to apply anticipatory action learning to ensure that meaning is shared with sensitivity and accuracy in multicultural situations. And, also, on how better to bring divergent perspectives to conversational situations that tend to reward convergent thinking.

In these pursuits, futurists should not forget the potential of the Internet for global conversations about the future. However there is a long way to go before the Net can be relied on for non-discriminatory, intercultural and intercivilisational multilogue. More than 93 percent of today's Internet users live among the world's richest 20 percent, and most of these users are in the social elite that can converse in English; many are experts.

The world's poorest 20 percent, discriminated against because so very many lack an international language, still account for less than one percent of current Internet users [9].

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