

Concepts and effects: ordering and practice in foresight

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Abstract

Purpose – This article seeks to reflect on the role of key concepts in foresight and futures work. The goal is to explore a set of concepts and link them to the effects they have in the world of foresight practice. It is argued that concepts order foresight practice and that though each foresight context and practitioner is unique, concepts bring a sense of order and coherence to foresight work and futures thinking. This reflection is placed in the context of a set of first principles the author acknowledges as his starting place for futures thinking and foresight practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper takes the form of conceptual analysis.

Findings – Concepts have effects and these can be assessed based on their ability to increase social and personal resilience in contexts characterised by change, complexity and uncertainty.

Research limitations/implications – Foresight practitioners clarify their own values and ethics through reflection on the concepts they use and the processes they deploy when working with clients.

Practical implications – More reflective foresight practice; greater conceptual clarity when reflecting on and communicating/teaching foresight and futures thinking.

Originality/value – This paper offers a basis for orienting foresight work towards the broader social goal of resilience through a deepened appreciation of how concepts inform process and structure meaning.

Keywords Futures, Culture, Anticipation, Concept, Pattern, Pragmatism

Paper type Conceptual paper

This paper makes the case that concepts have effects and that these effects are expressed, tested and adjusted through our practice. This means there is a dialogical movement between concepts and practice. This is the broader pragmatic concern of this investigation: the interface of concept and action. For me this is a pedagogical question because it involves the communication and practice of futures concepts. The justification for such an inquiry is that clarity around the conceptual framework of foresight practice strengthens the field and offers us tools to guide and validate what we do. I begin the inquiry into concepts and effects by looking at first principles in the practice of foresight.

From a pedagogical perspective, first principles certainly set the scene for a structured investigation into those elements of practice that are seldom seen but always present in the execution of an act. The dialogical interplay of concept and action is a beautiful space around which learning can occur. Hence for me reflections on this learning “space” invariably begin by looking at first principles. First principles scaffold a field and allow for concepts to take on greater meaning and relevance. They also generate contexts in which concepts and their effects can be framed and tested.

First principles: the research context

Eminent futurist Richard Slaughter once noted that the future **is a principle for present action**. This should be regarded as a fundamental principle in foresight practice as it links action with the conceptual space of the future. It holds the ethical force needed to “awaken” people

to needs and relationships beyond the immediate present. In doing so it does two important things. It brings the future into the present and anchors it in our lives while extending the temporal coordinates needed for truly living in an extended present.

From this intimate and subjective position the future can then be operationalised as an incentive to strategy, agency and anticipatory action learning. First principles emerge from this context as coordinates for the practitioner. There are 12 that currently inform my thinking:

1. The future is a principle for present action.
2. The future can be studied by its effects.
3. All futures work is partisan: it seeks to realise preferred futures.
4. All futures work is personal: it seeks to expand human potential/identity.
5. There are two kinds of future: open and closed futures.
6. Futures work is open ended and multiple: causality is not linear.
7. Futures work is process oriented not goal oriented – the focus is on patterning not a specific pattern.
8. Futures work involves a quest for alternatives.
9. Futures work is a form of practical imagination.
10. Futures work challenges habit, making the present remarkable.
11. Futures thinking, and the foresight work it inspires, involves nested relational nets and a relational logic to navigate these.
12. Futures thinking and foresight are forms of anticipatory action learning.

To this list I have often been tempted to add Jim Dator's challenge:

13. Any useful idea about the future must at first appear to be ridiculous.

I like this because it gets us away from the symmetry and symbolism of the number 12 and also because of its somewhat Zen-like quality of inversion (Matthews and Hattam, 2008). It creates a space around which (or within which) useful silence and gestation gathers. The ridiculous and absurd are important categories in sense making and have often been used to good effect in helping us manage complexity and the incompatibility of states.

First principles as futures narrative

These first principles structure both reflection and practice and generate an open and dynamic space for cultural evolution and social learning. Historically we live in a period of "waking up" (Korten, 2006; Macy, 2007) in which self-consciousness is no longer the privilege of a small elite. The future acts as an attractor in this process and demands attention in a way that it did not in pre-modernity. In this sense the future has been a luxury of the affluent yet it is becoming an increasingly distributed open-access zone for reflecting and acting in ways that empower from the grassroots up (Hawken, 2007; Parkin, 2010). Technically much of this dispersal is due to the open systems that characterise our increasingly globalised environment, but conceptually it is also due to the essential pragmatism of foresight work.

In all my foresight work these principles guide and shape the interactive space in which the work occurs. When considering the list from one to twelve a narrative line of flight appears. Yet it is not linear but multiple, offering an open context that depends on the presence of human needs, the inquiry these inspire and the action based thinking they evoke. Thus we find that taking the future as a principle of present action immediately orients us to the present and what we can do right now. Principle 1 is both a challenge and an offering to take up our agency and walk. In this how the future is understood, as premised in Principle 2, will have effects on what we do today. In short our thinking and assumptions about the future

underpin the decisions we make and can thus be studied in what we do. Our actions are the effects of our assumptions about the future. This leads to the third principle as we generally will not act against our own interest, so our relationship with the future is partisan as we seek advantage within our given context. This means that one thing foresight works seeks to do is to rethink advantage and context by exploring alternative meanings for advantage and suggesting broader nested possibilities for self-interest to take effect.

Such work can often lead to the fourth principle. Futures work is personal because to awaken to context means to find oneself and to explore our potentiality within a context. Re-reading context generally means re-reading self as our identities are intimately entwined with each present moment. Contexts often seem hegemonic. When experienced in this way we feel powerless. Our sense of agency diminishes and the future is experienced as closed and given. This of course is where the fifth principle arises, as the future can be experienced as either open or closed. Foresight work is always about opening up the future and challenging closure. To head in this direction involves an appreciation for the sixth principle as open futures cannot be given in any specified way. Openness cannot be predetermined of course so understanding that the future is multiple and open-ended requires conceptual and emotional resilience on the part of all involved in any foresight exercise.

Generally futures work is seeking to achieve something concrete such as competitive advantage; greater market share; increased flexibility; and healthier work environments. Such goals are of course realisable and success can be measured by indicators yet really the point of futures work is the process nature of how such goals are to be achieved. The mindfulness involved here is very much focused on the relational patterning that occurs as context is re-thought. The goal itself, as Principle 7 reminds us, is an 'excuse' for increased capacity and openness within context-structures which can, when unconsciously experienced, limit creativity, innovation and resilience.

Principle 8 therefore underpins the nature of foresight process. It is all about the quest for alternatives. This quest is based on a qualitative shift in questioning, the rethinking of advantage and the capacity to not just cope with but to value and nurture both complexity and uncertainty. This involves the application of practical imagination. The future can only ever be imagined, yet imagination is usually shaped and conditioned by the past, so it needs to be reoriented to present and future needs. Principle 9 reminds me that however 'ridiculous' an idea may seem it may have real implications for what we do: in short it can impact on our practice. Practical imagination challenges habit, which is what the tenth principle states. When we challenge the habits that bind us to past memes we immediately become alive to possibilities inherent to the present that had previously been edited out by habit.

A central habit we are confronted with is the acceptance of context as given. In fact, of course, context is nested within multiple other contexts all of which interact in creative and often surprising ways. This nested and relational domain is flagged by Principle 11 and immediately offers a basis for rethinking both agency and self-interest (Principle 3). The undoing of habits and the creation of new self-aware forms of being is essentially pedagogic. It involves both individual and collective learning. Thus in Principle 12 this learning is framed as anticipatory as it is premised on thinking not about immediate "givens" that close down the future but on open ended and creative possibilities that are tested and explored through action. This active testing is pragmatic in nature and anticipatory in orientation. Finally, the growing edge of social action of course is experimental and therefore can give form to quite surprising, or as Jim Dator would have it, ridiculous ideas. Principle 13 acknowledges that such ideas have utility in that they challenge assumptions and hold the space for alternatives thus generating the creative milieu from which truly useful and robust futures may emerge.

These principles set the scene for the following reflections on the role that futures concepts play in foresight work. The effects are what matters in both futures analysis and futures work as it is both diagnostic and therapeutic in nature. The first principles suggest seven concepts worth exploring to see how concept and effect inform futures practice. So after

situating futures work in the philosophical tradition of pragmatism the rest of this paper will be devoted to an exploration of the following concepts:

- the future;
- causality;
- patterning;
- closed and open futures;
- culture;
- practical imagination; and
- anticipation.

A brief case study will then be offered by way of an illustration of these concepts and principles in action. However, it is useful to situate futures thinking within the tradition of pragmatism to set the stage for exploration of the concepts outlined above.

Pragmatic orientation

Futures concepts are relatively simple but nonetheless powerful elements in a foresight practitioner's lexicon as they frame what is intelligible, ground our practice in an ethical orientation to both the future and those in the present while supplying direction and a "greater purpose" to our working lives. They also scaffold, as Inayatullah (2008a) ably demonstrated in his Six Pillars article, our approach to foresight work. The following sections are fragments from my "Futurist's Lexicon". This is obviously a work in progress. The reflections are organic and produced through the "doing" of the work.

Philosophically the overall approach falls within the field of pragmatism. I find it useful to be able to place foresight work within a tradition like pragmatism not simply because of the normative commitment of foresight to the contexts engaged in, i.e. foresight's essential pragmatism (colloquial usage). But also because philosophical pragmatism takes into account both our thinking and our doing as zones of multiplicity in which, as Robert Brandom (2008, p. xii) argues, we "situate concerns with the meanings of expressions in the broader context of concern with proprieties governing their use". This approach in Brandom's hands is very precise but it is useful for practitioners to be more relaxed and dance between the structural inquiry of early pragmatists such as William James[1], John Dewey and Charles Peirce who argued that pragmatism is a form of inquiry that works with assumptions about the world on which we are prepared to act and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1994) post-structuralism which recognised that concepts have effects in the world.

This paper is primarily focused on seven of concepts that have proven useful in my work as teacher and practitioner. It extends the thinking around the six shamanic concepts I outlined in an earlier paper (Bussey 2009a) to include, as noted above, the future, causality, patterning, closed and open futures, culture, practical imagination and anticipation. A thoughtful engagement with such concepts and their effects feeds into an appreciation of the first principles I have described.

The future

As just noted concepts have effects in the world of action. The place to begin then is with the concept of the future. The future has effects. We study the future because assumptions about it affect actions in the present. Or to put it another way: our assumptions about the future inform our decisions and actions today. Just as the past no longer exists but has effects in the present so the future, which is in no way tangible, works in the present through our own beliefs, values and expectations (Bussey *et al.*, 2012b). Foresight work is an attempt to become contextually aware of the world around us and of our relationship with the "reality" out there. Its focus is on how assumptions about the future shape current actions, policy and strategy, aspirations and fears and the relational and cognitive nets that maintain these.

The future therefore offers us a learning context from which pedagogies of possibility emerge (Bussey *et al.*, 2012a). Both in practice and also philosophically the future as a site of multiple possibilities needs to be approached as layered and contextually diverse (Bussey, 2009a). As such it generates nested pedagogical sites from which learning emerges. One way to navigate this multiplicity is via causal layered pedagogy (Bussey, 2009b) in which the learner as actor becomes the causal centre of a subjective universe (see Box 1).

Causality

Causality is a concept in its own right with its own set of effects. The temptation is to understand causality as a linear driver rather than as an organising node around which actions and effects cluster. Causality itself does not push things along as on a conveyor belt but effects via relational and nested responses to context. Thus CLA suggests a way of reading and ascribing agency that is nested and contextual rather than privileging any one layer over others (Inayatullah, 2004).

This understanding has the effect of opening up the context to greater levels of action on the part of stakeholders. Thus the stakeholders come to see their own complicity in any context. The causal logic here is simple: just as they are currently maintaining their context through either active or passive behaviour they can also change this to rework the world around them. The basic insight therefore is that agency, however constrained by force of circumstance, always lies where the stakeholder stands and in the context that they determine.

To see causality as linear leads to relatively circumscribed futures in which agency is bound to set conditions and imagination is limited. To understand that causality is layered and latent within any context allows stakeholders to explore their own roles in the present and see how it is possible to craft richer and more wholesome futures. In short, the linear leads to closed futures while the nonlinear leads to open futures. Both closed and open futures will be explored shortly (see Box 2).

Before we turn to open and closed futures it is important to emphasise the process orientation of this understanding of causality by looking at the powerful concept of patterning and its effects.

Patterning

Coming to foresight work with a background in history and the arts has helped me see how human beings are pattern makers (Bussey, 2008). They do not simply look at the stars and

Box 1. Assumptions about the future shape action and policy in the present.

Our concept of the future effects how we act, therefore:

1. Change thinking about the future and we change present actions.
2. Open the concept of the future up to multiple readings and we create multiple possible futures.
3. Multiple futures increase personal and social resilience.
4. Multiple futures suggest alternatives to the present.

Box 2. Causality is non-linear

Our concept of causality effects where we place the onus for action, therefore:

1. Linear causality disempowers stakeholders who see the origins of change as "out there".
2. Multi-causality empowers stakeholders by placing them at the centre of their world.
3. Linear causality leads to closed futures.
4. Multi-causality leads to open futures.

see stars. They see patterns in the stars and ascribe meaning to these. The early work of Joseph Campbell (2008) and William Irwin Thompson (2004) understood such patterning as mythic in nature. Roberto Calasso (1993) has revealed how such mythic patterning can be understood via a social and cultural reading, while Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe it via their metaphor of the rhizome. Similarly, both Steven Pinker (2011) and George Lakoff (2005) have, in their own ways, demonstrated that pattern via meme and metaphor shape human activity.

Patterns and meaning go together as powerful socio-cultural memes and are incredibly powerful ordering processes. According to Spencer Wells (2010) it seems such an instinct for pattern may be genetic. Furthermore, pattern making has cumulative effects as cultures, the realm of the mimetic, extend the patterns via what David Christian (2004) has called "collective learning". So we have natural and cultural evolution working in tandem.

It is useful to think of pattern as a concept with three states and to ground these with reference to foresight tools such as the futures landscape[2] (Inayatullah, 2007) and causal layered analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 2004).

- Pre-pattern is the state of chaos in which there is no intelligibility. It is the condition of the jungle (futures landscape) or litany (CLA/CLP) in which things just "happen". There is no direction and no sense here. The individual is free to act as an individual but has no coordinates to navigate by. Experience is random and confusing. The effect of this state is deep ambivalence as this condition brings with it a sense of freedom along with deep insecurity.
- Pattern contains the chaos of pre-pattern. It brings order to the universe and is the heart of culture. It is through pattern that we ground our identities both individually and collectively. This grounding comes at a cost however as we lose freedom but gain security. It could be said that the effect of pattern is disciplined order. In foresight work this equates with strategy and vision (futures landscape) and system/worldview (CLA). Thus we can see that strategy and system order the world socially while vision and worldview reify it via knowing and reasoning. It is also what Jim Dator (2002) is describing in his scenario archetype of "disciplined society".
- Patterning offers a degree of both security and freedom. Rather than being a state or condition it is a process. It returns agency to context by focusing on the ordering work we all do to negotiate "reality". Neither security nor freedom are absolutes in this process but continually negotiated conditions in which the foresight practitioner and stakeholders work pragmatically between the structures that pattern our experiences and the cultural flows that keep existence alive, unstable and open. This process aligns with the plant – a growing and emergent participatory learning context (futures landscape) and myth/metaphor (CLA). The effect is to empower stakeholders and to generate alternatives to dominant (disciplined) patterns.

This description of pattern is deliberately evolutionary in nature. The trajectory of human culture has been to experiment, innovate, reflect and test; action learning and the research that underpins this is therefore central to cultural process. This has led over millennia to where we are today at what David Gershon (2009) calls the "growing edge". The human experience of this process has often been difficult because with specialisation and complexity has come pattern – the reduction of alternatives. Just as we domesticated sheep, cattle and poultry we have also domesticated ourselves! Yet evolution keeps on going and there is a growing sense – that growing edge – that humans are able to reclaim greater agency through the awareness of our own role as pattern makers.

The funnelling of culture towards disciplined or closed futures is elegantly captured by Spencer Wells' observation:

There is a problem with the success of our cultural adaptability, though. In the process of creating a densely populated, agricultural way of life, we were forced to subsume our individual desires for novelty to the desires of the broader culture...In effect, minds that had once been free, with the endless territory of the Palaeolithic globe in which to realize their musings, were now caged, limited in both geography and focus (Wells, 2010, p. 113).

Yet Wells does not stop there. He sees the possibilities of “cross-fertilization” and innovation as hallmarks of culture and as the drivers for a shift from closed to open futures. To see foresight work and the futures thinking that accompanies it as promoting this shift towards patterning is a powerful insight into why foresight practice is so exciting (see Box 3).

This brings us to the concept of open and closed futures (Figure 1).

Closed and open futures

This simple conceptual dichotomy is a powerful set of variables as each holds the psycho-emotional space for a range of futures. Much of the foresight practitioner’s work involves helping people move from closed to open states and in seeding the resilience needed to manage both the turbulence and the ensuing uncertainty that results from this shift. The Shell Scenario (Shell International, BV, 2008) team describe this as moving from elation at starting the scenario journey through to disorientation and then back to elation as scenarios come into focus. They warn that the emotional rollercoaster as individuals and groups gain momentum in the process can generate stress.

It can be a strange experience working within a process that seeks to include many different points of view rather than to pursue consensus. Some have described this as feeling as if there is no firm goal, and therefore no real sense of progress. Added to this, the improvisational nature of scenario work may lead to feelings of frustration and perhaps anxiety, even for those with experience. From the midst of the process, it may seem at times as though the scenarios will never come together (Shell International, BV, 2008, p. 51).

Essentially closed futures correspond to a dominant pattern. The pattern assures identity and when it is destabilised the reaction is one of insecurity and anxiety. Identity is, after all, the only way we can recognise ourselves in the mirror of the world. Closed futures maintain that coherence. They explain why many in politics, business and civil society are prepared to risk all our tomorrows for stability today. Closed futures can be what Inayatullah describes as used futures, disowned futures and business as usual futures (Shell International, BV, 2008).

Box 3. Humanity experiences the world at different times as pre-pattern, pattern or patterning

The concept of the patterning effects where we place agency in the world, therefore:

1. Understanding the world as patterning returns agency to stakeholders.
2. Recognising the role pattern plays in culture allows us to rethink our relationship with dominant norms and imagine alternatives.
3. The three states of patterning allows for an evolutionary understanding of human process/experience.
4. The three states of patterning allows for a layered conception of reality in which at times any one state is dominant.
5. The three states of patterning allows for identity to be understood as always provisional, negotiated and open yet fixed (moment by moment) within contexts that support it.

Figure 1 Open and closed futures



Close futures are committed to a specific set of referents that assure the maintenance of specific interests, values and norms while weeding out via cultural editing possibilities that do not sustain these.

Open futures by contrast are pluralistic, inclusive and participatory. They are characterised by resilient identity in which people appreciate the layered and complex nature of being and the range of “voices” at work in any context (Stone and Stone, 1989; Ferruci, 2004). There is openness to both inner subtler states as well and to broad encounters with other ways of knowing, feeling and doing (Bussey, 2010). Opening up the future is both risky and exciting. The effects can be transformative when stakeholders can manage risk and innovation and tolerate the turbulence that comes with exploration (see Box 4).

An appreciation of the relative “closedness or openness” of any context enables us to look for elements that either enable or block the transformative journey from closed to open that practitioners and stakeholders are seeking to take. Furthermore, we can see how confidence and fear play out in social settings in which identity moves from the default switch of closed, narrow and brittle during times of wide spread social anxiety to open, relational and inclusive at times of buoyant confidence. This explains the swinging nature of voting for instance.

Within the context of open and closed futures lies the possibility of identifying futures blocks, gaps and friends.

Culture

Approaching the future as a tool for transformation requires futurists to help stakeholders identify aspects of the environment that will prevent, distort or enable transformative action. Culture is a composite of patterns that do all of these things. This is true both of a civilisational culture or the very local cultures of family, communities and institutions. Culture is definitely a mixed bag. As a concept it has very clear effects as it is often used in a way that disempowers those who live in it. Cultural elites do promote ideas of culture that offer us high culture and low culture, in which high culture is aligned with a sense of purity and authority and low culture is populist and crude.

Yet as Foucault (2005) and Derrida (2002) both demonstrate culture is a deeply layered set of narrative experiences that have historical, contextual and epistemological roots in power structures and hierarchies of identity. Culture, as a result, edits our experience of reality and frames possibilities and our capacity to imagine and act beyond its parameters. To expose this editing and its effects is a core element of foresight. This work can be approached in three stages.

First, there is the “story” of culture. This story has been captured already in part by the quotation above from Spencer Wells. Culture is the product of human patterning. Millennia of patterning has given us the world of patterned, globalising and hybridising cultures we experience today. The bedrock of all fundamentalisms is an over attachment to a singular aspect of pattern. Patterning is the lived reality while pattern is an enforced state of closure that seeks to maintain sets of relations that support specific interests and the assumptions

Box 4. Closed futures privilege pattern over patterning; open futures do the reverse

Our concept of the future (closed or open) effects how we feel/identify, therefore:

1. When identity is threatened we retreat into closed “secure” futures and the pattern that sustain these.
2. When identity is expansive we reach out to others and understand the relational patterning nature of being that is an expression of a deeper humanity.
3. Closed futures decrease personal and social resilience.
4. Open futures increase personal and social resilience.
5. Open futures promote hope.

that maintain these. Such pattern sustains identity and provides a sense of security to those who hold tight to them. Divergence from the pattern is edited out of the script by an exertion of cultural, intellectual or physical violence. Or any mix of the three. This can be thought of as Culture 1. Culture seen in this light has evolved to maintain security and identity in a world often characterised as the “jungle” – a pre-pattern state that threatens order, stability and the continuity of a collective.

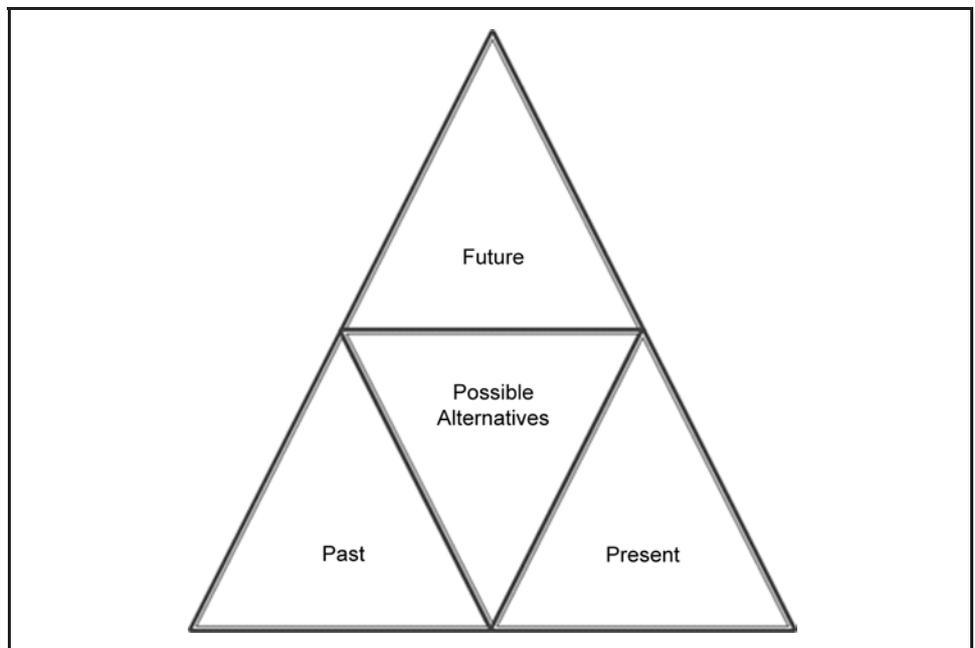
Culture however also does something else. Spencer Wells’ (2010, p. 111) identifies this as the capacity of elements of culture to adapt and expand to meet new conditions. From the Indian philosopher Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar’s (1978) perspective this capacity hinges on the eternal longing of both individuals and groups for expansion – expressed ultimately in poetry and mysticism as a longing for the great that is always beyond one’s reach. Both perspectives capture the essence of culture’s gift of creative reconfiguration in which ideas, practices, and identities evolve through interaction with changing sets of conditions. This aspect of culture can be thought of as Culture 2.

The story of Cultures 1 and 2 parallels the open and closed futures we discussed earlier. Closed futures are premised on closed culture in which security is the defining function. Open futures in contrast are premised on open cultures that allow for experimentation, hybridity and change. The effects of both Culture 1 and Culture 2 are that human capacity and resilience are either curtailed or enhanced.

Second, it is necessary to understand how “reality” is framed by the past-present-future nexus. The use of Inayatullah and Milojevic’s futures triangle (Figure 2) helps here (Inayatullah, 2008a, b). The futures triangle allows those in context to explore the role that the past, the present and the future play in defining what is possible. The result should be that stakeholders perform a futures stock-take in which key elements of their context are understood to be rooted in the past, caught up in present or anchored in assumptions and aspirations deferred to the future.

The past, experienced as weight, with all its highs and lows, as Foucault showed can be accessed genealogically. Memory work here is important as one of the first casualties of closed futures is a broader set of memories and narratives that adds nuance and subtly to cultural process. The present, experienced as push, rich in emergent trends and anxieties,

Figure 2 The futures triangle



can often be hijacked by what Douglas Rushkoff (2013) has aptly called “present shock”. Yet the present is known by stakeholders and with proper encouragement can be “remembered” as sets of possibilities and constrains in tension that are reclaimed from the realm of the “unkown knowns” that Donald Rumsfeld identified some years ago. The future, experienced as pull, as the site of our hopes, fears and yearnings, also calls to us to action. To the fearful the possibilities of disaster are manifold with the future perched like a siren on the rocks luring us to our deaths. To the savvy the future is the land of endless possibilities. Foresight works between these zones and draws on the promise of transformation, what Michel Godet (2010, p. 1458) calls futurables “preferred futures”, while always holding to the precautionary principle. In the intersection of the past, present and future we can rethink our current practice and discover possibilities and alternatives immanent to context that had been previously overlooked (Bussey 2009b).

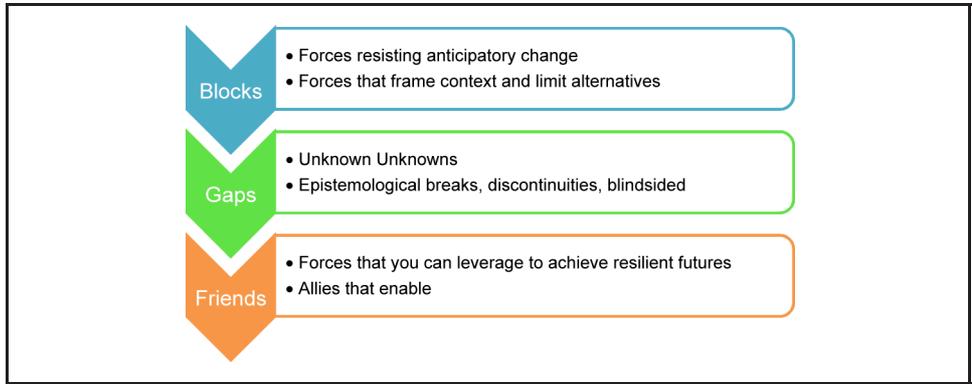
Third, it is important to take into account, via a futures audit, the futures blocks, friends and gaps (Figure 3) inherent to the foresight context. Stakeholders hold the social and cultural capital necessary to identify these features of their environment (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003). Stakeholders are often focused on those forces in their environments that resist change. They are therefore very good at identifying these. Futures blocks are the given parameters and discourse that frame meaning and action. An audit of blocks helps clear the deck so that the real conversation can begin.

With blocks identified the conversation can move on to a search for “futures friends”. These are aspects of organisational or community culture that foster positive change. They can be thought of as the resources present in the room – skills, knowledge, memory, networks – on which positive changes can be based. They are the allies that will enable positive change.

Between the blocks and the friends sit the futures gaps. This is the domain of the indeterminate where what we do not know what we know resides. Such gaps can, as Francis Fukuyama (2007) and his colleagues remind us, blindsides us and should be understood as immanent to context (Bussey 2009a). Sometimes characterised as the “elephant in the room”, futures gaps refer to elements of a group culture that have for whatever reason be edited out, suppressed, disowned or “forgotten”. CLA is often a great tool for unearthing such gaps as they can exist at the margins of awareness. However, they can sometimes literally be so obvious that no one sees them or is brave enough to identify them. It is often that such gaps are understood to be, in the deliciously provocative words of Douglas Adams (1982), hidden or cloaked by an “SEP”, an invisibility device premised on the fact that no one sees “somebody else’s problem” (see Box 5).

Foresight work that understands its function within culture becomes dynamic and empowering. Such work involves a certain kind of practical imagination. This is the next concept in my futurist’s lexicon.

Figure 3 Futures audit: blocks, gaps and friends



Box 5. Culture is contradictory (Culture 1 and Culture 2), multi-temporal and the context for both renewal and decline

Our concept of culture grounds identity, therefore:

1. Foresight work aims to liberate identity from Culture 1 and activate Culture 2.
2. Foresight work locates agency within the past-present-future nexus of culture.
3. Foresight work empowers stakeholders through revealing the richness of the present via an exploration of futures blocks, gaps and friends.

Practical imagination

Imagination is another concept that has clear effects. It is that which can undo the common place and make the present remarkable. At all moments in the evolution of culture human beings have had to imagine the next step. They have done this collectively because, as Spencer Wells (2010, pp. 112-113) reminds us, we are “social machines that produce and refine ideas”. This mimetic capacity, first theorised by Richard Dawkins (1989), to generate and disseminate concepts has been key to the social evolution of our species. It has involved a dance between the individual and their collectives. This movement has been essentially practical.

For instance, it is easy to imagine a Natufian hunter gatherer struggling to feed her family as the ice age (known as the Younger Dryas) took its toll on the once abundant food supply of the “green crescent” of West Asia (modern day Jordan and Israel). She sits down one evening around the camp fire, Wells (2010, p. 112) describes these settings as “innovation think tanks”, muttering about how difficult it is to feed her children and a conversation ensues. They might even work their way through futures blocks, gaps and friends. Ultimately she or someone else comes up with a brainwave: let us plant some of our precious seed, water it regularly, protect it from marauding cattle so that we grow more seed and ensure a constant supply of food. The rest as they say is history. In this way practical imagination changes the way things are done.

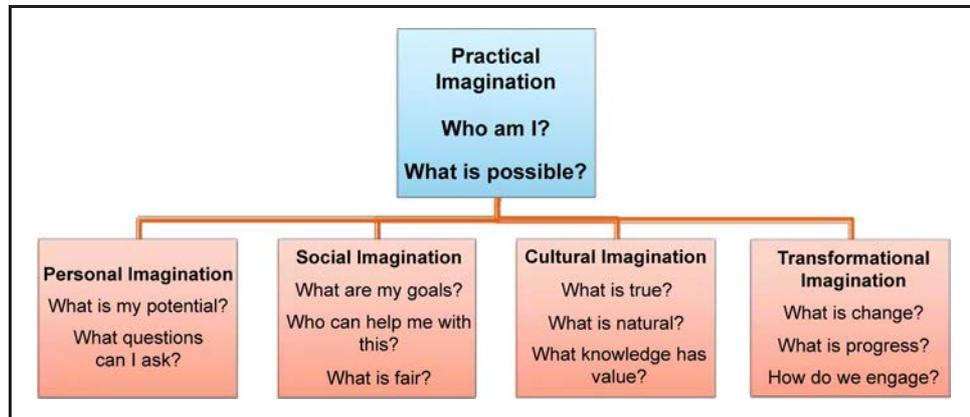
Similarly peace theorist John Paul Lederach (2005) describes situations in which people in conflict situations are forced to work their way through futures blocks, gaps and friends in order to creatively and effectively grapple with the sources of violence in their communities. The process always begins with a small group of people reclaiming their right to act and then going through a futures stock take and audit (my terms not his). In this the combined imagination, will and social capital of the collective is brought to bear in finding the solution to the problem. Lederach argues that this process requires a moral imagination.

The kind of imagination to which I refer is mobilized when four disciplines and capacities are held together and practiced by those who find their way to rise above violence. Stated simply, the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence (Lederach, 2005, p. 5).

In this way practical imagination can be seen to combine the personal, the social, the cultural and the transformational as captured in Figure 4. Each is a questioning of context from a specific perspective.

That concepts fold in on one another is clear when looking at the nature of the inquiry sketched in the above figure. In looking at the questioning which begins with identity – Who am I? What is my potential? What questions can I ask? We can see how the personal is located in the affective domains of the future, causality and culture. We can also see how such questions link to questions addressed by the futures triangle and the futures audit as it explores blocks, gaps and friends. Yet there are broader and deeper levels of inquiry in which the effects of concepts can be seen as they relate to both individual and collective agency. Thus we encounter questions about purpose and justice; truth, the natural and value.

Figure 4 Practical imagination



As foresight practitioners and stakeholders work with these intangibles new configurations of the possible begin to come into focus. In this way the transformational is approached and the anticipatory dimensions of foresight work take shape. Thus questions such as “What is change?” and “What is progress?” ultimately lead to the practical question of “How do we engage?” To reach this point requires something of both the practitioner and stakeholders beyond method. As Lederach notes in his reflections on conflict resolution work, engaging the moral or practical imagination requires a synthesis of the personal with the collective. To find our way to this point calls for *“the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist”* (Lederach, 2005, p. ix, italics in original). To reach this point we must take the future personally as a principle for action (see Box 6).

A robust practical imagination is premised on our ability to anticipate within the context of massive flows of information, layered causal threads, multiple cultural contexts and all the uncertainty that such complexity instills. Anticipation is the final concept in these reflections from my futurist’s lexicon. It captures the openness of foresight work and the fact that we need both external pressures as well as internal yearnings to fully embrace our human destiny as ancestors of the future.

Anticipation

Anticipation covers both our preferences and our fears. It is a powerful concept with clear effects in the world of action. On the one hand the word evokes a sense of promise, and this is important to any futures practice, as to see the future as only a place of dark foreboding diminishes our ability to respond proactively and with the necessary mixture of courage and imagination. Yet we also need to have the real fear of collapse and decline to goad us into both personal and collective action.

Therefore anticipatory futures, and the foresight work it engenders, offers us both the carrot and the stick. Both are woven into the fabric of the possible and both invite us to consider how best to engage with the question of sustainable futures as a praxis grounded in local

Box 6. Practical Imagination identifies and activates the creative domains within culture

This concept of Practical Imagination has effects in the cultural domain that are expressed in individual and social actions to improve the world, therefore:

1. Foresight work aims to liberate the practical imagination
2. Foresight work explores cultural resources as the source for re-imagining what is possible.
3. Appreciate that the world we know and experience occurs, as the pragmatist would have it, in the encounter between subjective experience and objective adjustment.

realities yet striving for a beyond that will remain forever unattainable; offering a universalisable possibility of sustainability that is always just out of reach, yet always calling us forth to action (see Box 7).

All these concepts and the principles that underpin them come into effect when I engage with others in foresight contexts.

Brief case study

Recently I have been working with colleagues involved with the Regional Centre of Expertise West Sweden. This is a UN sponsored project that is seeking to revitalise culture and business in the Gothenburg area of Sweden. The project is exploring a distributed organisational structure. We ran workshops with key stakeholders that looked at how to lead without disempowering. We went through pretty standard futures processes over two days moving from emergent issues analysis to futures wheels and then on to a CLA of the issue of power and leadership.

Participants began with a static understanding of the future as a vague catch all over which they worried considerably. Causality lay with others or within organisational structures. They made sense of their world via rules and habits (Pattern) and generally subscribed to a closed futures model that they sought to manage rather than transform. They all felt caught in closed cultures that were security focused (risk management) and had therefore, in efforts to protect themselves reduced their imaginative catalogue to conventional aspirations for the future based on incremental change (reaction) in the present. For many anticipation was linked to worry and concern so it was evident that the stick, not the carrot, was a key player in how they negotiated their life-world.

Yet importantly, they were hopeful and yearning for something more. This of course was why they were involved in this new project. So it was with relief that they engaged with the futures process and a wide array of “Ah ha!” moments occurred. What was key however to this session was that they discovered it was very hard to imagine power as empowering. It seemed that the reciprocity required for power to empower was absent from their working contexts. The CLA session stalled as participants struggled to find a meaningful (aka credible) way forward. This led to a deep reflection in the group on how they imagined and experienced their world. They came to see that the commitment to a decentralised organisation structure was aspirational rather than practical. In the current paradigm it could be called a “ridiculous” idea. So they stepped back from the task of organising and started to ask questions about the elements of such an organisation; they explored what they already had and what was imminent to their working lives; they committed to incremental and reflective actions that were shared learnings in the anticipatory sense. The outcome was happily partial and open ended with a sense that the conversation and the learning-forward had now begun in earnest.

Throughout this the first principles ticked away and held the space within which participants explored and tested transformative possibilities. The practical outcome was a commitment to an ongoing conversation, a sense that their project had merit and was only the beginning of an exciting rethinking of power and organisational process.

Box 7: anticipation combines the full spectrum of lived experience. It alerts us to both opportunities and risks in the environment. It harnesses the energy of both Cultures 1 and 2 while not foreclosing on the future

Our concept of anticipation informs foresight work, therefore:

1. Foresight work is both realistic and transformative.
2. Foresight work is a form of social learning that seeks to understand and navigate “realities” through a process of anticipatory action learning.

Conclusion

Drawing on this sketch and the reflections it seeks to illustrate the future can be understood as a learning category that is always normatively grounded in a specific foresight context. This grounding is essential to the pragmatic concerns of those in context and determines the foresight practitioner's own response to the foresight encounter. This means that foresight work is inherently partisan as it seeks to gain advantage for those in a context. This partisanship can be toxic in a closed futures environment where comparative advantage is the *modus operandi* of a tunnel visioned and narrow evolutionary protocol. In an open futures context it takes on an ethical dimension in which advantage is not calculated in a zero sum way but in a context in which participatory and co-creative outcomes nest advantage across and between systems.

Thus advantage is distributed through a system and constantly shifts to account for need and the promise of transformation. This anticipatory promise, along with its shadow – the fear of decline and collapse – is what ultimately grounds foresight work in a sense of working for the world. Such work is paradoxically deeply personal while retaining the necessary conceptual clarity to engage the world on its own terms. It is important then that foresight practitioners examine the concepts that shape their work and frame their values. This paper has been an attempt to reflect on a set of principles and concepts that shape how I operate when engaged in foresight work. I argue that developing an appreciation for concepts and their effects can inform deeper more reflective practice. Such an awareness fosters clarity and such clarity, and the transparency clarity engenders, strengthens the foresight case in context while challenging both foresight practitioners and stakeholders to always seek to reframe “self-interest” via a relational ethics in which win-win becomes our ultimate key performance indicator.

Notes

1. See for instance William James' *Will to Believe* (1897, p. 124), via Google Books http://books.google.com.sg/books?id=wRMXL4uYEegC&pg=PA124&redir_esc=y “Indeed, it may be said that if two apparently different definitions of the reality before us should have identical consequences, those two definitions would really be identical definitions, made delusively to appear different merely by the different verbiage in which they are expressed.”
2. A futures method originally developed by Hardin Tibbs and then extended by Sohail Inayatullah. There are four stages to this method. The landscape is read as a set of four nested states of perception and action. The first is Jungle, the second, Strategy, the third, Vision and the fourth symbolised by the Plant is Creative Emergence. This final stage moves social action from individuals to communities.

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