

FUTURES STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA:

from the family to institutionalisation to professional networks

by Sohail Inayatullah

I remember when I was thinking of moving from Hawaii to Australia. Most of my Hawaii friends warned me – how you can leave multicultural heaven for a country built on racism and still unable to accept the “other.” As it turns out they were wrong institutionally – Australia has excellent legislation against racism – and wrong personally, as I have felt accepted throughout Australia. That said, there is a long way to go until the hierarchy of accents, skin colour and ways of knowing become flatter. Social progress, for me, is about higher levels of inclusion, not just of humans but of nature and technology – robots – as well. Implementing Australia’s fine laws, thus, is more about a cultural transformation, moving from the nation-state model of “the fortress” to the Gaian model of ecology.

I came to Australia through a meeting with Tony Stevenson, in Dubrovnik and in Turku, through the world futures studies federation. He asked me to teach courses with him in Fiji and in Bangkok. These courses were co-sponsored by the Communication

Centre, Queensland University of Technology. Eventually Tony suggested I apply for a post-doctoral fellowship there. I did and received the fellowship in 1994. For me, certainly Tony was the father of Futures Studies in Australia. And the mother, well, she was certainly Jan Lee Martin. Jan was the network coordinator, connecting clients with futurists: the rigour of theory with the relevance of the market. Through Jan, I learned how to present complex futures theories to clients who wished to have their ways of knowing challenged, but in the context of market, product, and customer relevance.

THE FAMILY

I was later to find out, through Patricia Kelly, that the grandfathers of futures studies in Australia were Barry Jones, the President of the Australia Labour Party and Ian Lowe, the President of the Australian Commission on the Future. They had laid the groundwork for Tony and Jan to spread their ideas of the future.

Tony’s influence was ubiquitous. Through Tony I met Paul Wildman. We cooperated on creating the first web course in Futures Studies at Southern Cross University. Paul taught this course in 1995. Jenny Gidley, who would later become the President of the World Futures Studies Federation, facilitated this process as she was doing her MA there. Unfortunately SCU did not have the foresight to continue this course. However, Paul and I did engage their senior executive leadership on a short futures workshop on SCU 2020. We did a decent job; though what they participants liked the most was a video on Paradigms by Joel Barker not my facilitation per se. But through Paul Wildman, SCU gets credit for beginning the process of institutionalizing Futures Studies in Australia.

From the family model of grandfathers, fathers and mothers, the next phase was moving Futures Studies into arenas of higher learning. Leading this way has been Dr. Robert Burke who is futurist-in-residence at Mt Eliza Executive Centre, Melbourne Business School. Robert has taught over a

thousand senior executives how to think differently about the future. Equally important has been Richard Slaughter, who brought Futures Studies to Swinburne University. Drs Joe Voros and Peter Hayward and Rowena Morrow have continued evolving the futures curricula there. Futures Studies has also taken off at the University of the Sunshine Coast through the efforts of Marcus Bussey and Steve Gould. Institutionalization has put to the forefront issues of theory, methodology and schools of thought. Australia is fortunate to have a number of schools of thought – with intense debates between them - but all have focused on rigour, epistemological pluralism and learning from praxis.

THE SUCCESS OF FUTURES STUDIES

In more recent times as Futures Studies have spread, concerns over professionalization have grown. Should there be gatekeepers to being a futurist? Or can anyone who has learned a few scenarios methods and has an eye out for new technologies consider themselves a futurist, and make money from doing so.

As more and more governmental departments at the Federal (Australian Federal Police, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Defence) engage in foresight exercises, as more and corporations engage in

futures work (Bluescope Steel, BUPA, AAMI, Zurich, Ernst and Young) and as Futures Studies spreads to the indigenous community (the Lowitja institute), State government (throughout Queensland's government), city councils (Brisbane, Gold Coast, Logan, Sunshine Coast, Pine Rivers, and many others), spiritual groups (Ananda Marga) questions of quality and boundary continue to be raised.

However, and, if, these issues are resolved; there will always be a tension between the centralized model (one way of doing things with clear standards) and the networked model (multiple sources of knowledge, some with standards and some without). However, the era of the family as the operating narrative of Futures Studies in Australia is now over, and new modes of organizing persons and ideas are required. Clearly new metaphors of organizing futurists are required.

But why has there been such an exponential growth of Futures Studies in Australia. While certainly the “seeding” of ideas credit needs to be given to the grandfathers and parents, external economic and global factors are equally pivotal. First, Australia has had among the best, if not the best, economic record of OECD nations in the past fifteen or so years. There is surplus to be spent on innovation and looking at what is next. But economic growth, while a necessary

factor, is not sufficient. The sufficient factor is increased risk in the world political-economy. The Asian Financial crisis began this risk. September 11, SARS, Bird Flu, The Global Financial Crisis have continued the perception that while times are good, they could immediately become bad. When running foresight workshops in Singapore, I asked leading Singaporeans why they had embraced the Foresight paradigm. They responded that SARS had changed their risk paradigm. They felt far more vulnerable and realized it was only through their brains (knowledge innovation) and smiles (better service) could they succeed in a challenging world economy. Australia does not have the same vulnerability but certainly the perception that Australia needs to identify weak signals and discern the first and second order impacts of current issues is on the top of the minds of Australian financial, social and political leaders. The world is not stable, change is complex and heterogeneous.

Thus while Australia is a continent, it is far from alone. Futures Studies in Australia lives in a regional context. Futures Studies is widely used in New Zealand (through the work of James Duncan, Jennifer Cootes, Yvonne Curtis and Alan Fricker) and the Asia-Pacific region (with Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, South Korea and Singapore leading the way). There Futures Studies is institutionalized

in government (through Presidential commissions, the Office of the PM) and in universities, as with Tamkang University (where 5000 students annually take a course in Futures Studies), Universiti Sains Malaysia and Nanyang Technological University.

LESSONS LEARNED

My main lessons from living in Australia have been:

1. Anticipatory Action Learning. While even in my early teens I remember discussions on participatory action development (conversations between my father and Orlando Fals-Borda), it was in Australia where I truly understood the notion of learning by doing. Structure was important but process and emergence more so. I am grateful to my teachers Robert Burke, Tony Stevenson, Bob Dick and Paul Wildman for insights. It was through a research grant from the International Management Centres that I could explore action learning that was futures oriented. This led to book titled *Questioning the Future*.
2. From Peter Saul, I learned that success does not come from a job

but from having many happy clients. This changed my view of work and employment. As well, Peter taught that as a facilitator-consultant, whatever we are weak at – what we disown – becomes the issue in a workshop. We need to be present to our weaknesses, our disowned selves. And indeed, it was through the consultant, John Ford that I began to research the notion of multiple selves as developed by Hal and Sidra Stone.

3. It was through hundreds of students at Mt Eliza Executive Education that I learned of relevance. At the University of Hawaii, Department of Political Science, our focus was on rigour. At the Hawaii Judiciary, where I worked for ten years as a futurist, our focus was on negotiating the changing meanings held by stakeholders, but it was in Australia where I changed my pedagogy to focus on what participants needed. Tamkang University students also helped me take critical theory and simplify it for non-English speakers. I am truly grateful to them. In Australia, focused on the practical, the doable, this has become even more important. Theory and rigour are not lost sight of, but they are certainly backgrounded.

4. Finally, futurists tend to be open, caring, and flexible. I am grateful to Steve Gould, Marcus Bussey and Jose Ramos for sharing in this sometimes difficult life lesson – “how to stay open and retain a hard edge.”

In conclusion, Futures Studies continues to evolve in Australia, moving from the family discourse to the institutional and now the developing professional. These discourses should not however be seen as stages but rather as overlapping ways of being.

I am fortunate to have played a part in developing Futures Studies in Australia and the broader Asia-Pacific Region, and thankful to colleagues, students and clients on this near 20 year journey “down under.” My final learning from Australia is ENAA – everything needs an acronym.