

## 2. UNDERSTANDING FUTURES STUDIES

### ➤ LECTURE NOTES

#### **Beginnings**

- The role of H.G. Wells in making the future a field of study
- Post-World War Two developments in establishing a futures field

#### **The futures field**

- The role of futures research in business and industry
- Futures studies as an international academic field

#### **Futures studies**

- Wendell Bell (Yale University): aims of futures studies
- James Dator (University of Hawaii): 'laws of the future'

### ➤ KEY READING

- Inayatullah, S. (2008) Six pillars: futures thinking for transforming ~ [www.metafuture.org/](http://www.metafuture.org/)
- Bell, W. (2005) An overview of futures studies, *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, Vol. 1, Pt. 1, CD-ROM

### ➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you understand the aims of futures studies to be?
- Why is it important to have a notion of the 'good society'?

### ➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Awareness of how and why the futures field emerged
- Critical understanding of the importance of futures studies

## LECTURE NOTES

### 1. BEGINNINGS

This session introduces the international field of futures studies a key element in the academic grounding for this teaching unit. This begins with the origin and nature of the broader futures field, before focusing more specifically on futures studies itself.

#### H.G. Wells

Many futurists, those professionally concerned with the future, consider H.G. Wells (1866-1946) to be the founder of 'futurism' (Wagar, 2005). In his lifetime he became an internationally known figure both through his novels and his non-fiction writing. His science fiction included *The Time Machine* (1885), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and the film *Things to Come* (1936). In his writings he foresaw space flight, lunar landings, nuclear energy, worldwide TV, and ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles).

His non-fiction work *Anticipations* (1902) was the first comprehensive and widely read survey of possible future developments in human history. In a BBC radio broadcast in 1932 he said:

It seems an odd thing to me that though we have thousands and thousands of professors working upon the records of the past...there is not a single person anywhere who makes a whole-time job of estimating the future consequences of new inventions...There is not a single Professor of Foresight in the world.

Today, of course, there are 'professors of foresight' but their field of study is different from all others in that its direct subject matter does not yet exist. The future can only be studied indirectly through the images, hopes, expectations, forecasts, dreams and stories that people hold in relation to it. As Warren Wagar (1992) aptly notes: 'The future is a very murky place. There are no eye-witness accounts, no first hand evidence. Worse still ... all images of the future ... are also shaped by the normative preconceptions of the inquirer' (p.34).

#### Post-WW2

After World War Two methodical exploration of the likely outcomes of social, technological, and military change became more marked, especially through the work of the military and the big corporations. The 50s and 60s saw the gradual emergence of full-time academics

and professionals, generally working for large industrial and governmental think-tanks, who devoted much of their time to futures work. Governments also began to take a longer term view of the future, albeit often limited to their term in office.

Two of the key futures organisations today are the *World Future Society*, founded in 1966, its members largely coming from the USA, mainly from the business world, with a conservative/liberal emphasis and the *World Futures Studies Federation*, founded in 1973, more international in scope, its members mostly academic or from NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and interested in social/political/cultural change, with a liberal/radical emphasis.

The futures field received a significant boost in the 1970s with wider popular debate about futures emerging as a result of Toffler's popular book, *Future Shock* (1972), and the Club of Rome's report *Limits to Growth* (1972). The former explored the rapid nature of change in western society through the notion of the 'future' arriving too quickly and the latter reported on the first ever exercise in global computer modelling.

## **2. THE FUTURES FIELD**

Richard Slaughter of Foresight International is a key figure in the futures field and editor of the 5-volume *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* on CD-ROM. He argues that the futures field embraces three distinct, but overlapping, elements: i) *futures research* (major knowledge seeking focus); ii) *futures studies* (the study of alternative futures); and iii) *futures movements* (social movements aiming at creating a better world).

### **Futures research**

Futures research aims to anticipate and prepare for the future and is the territory of specialists working for government departments, transnational corporations and other large organisations. Futures research is particularly concerned with prediction using methods such as trend extrapolation, economic and technical forecasting, systems analysis, simulation of change processes, global modelling and risk/benefit analysis.

## **Futures studies**

Futures studies (see below) is the term used to embrace the concerns of all those who have a specific interest in studying the future, such as academics, educators, social critics, change agents and activists. Futures studies can thus be found as a specific subject for study at university level, e.g. the University of Hawaii, University of Houston and Tamkang University, Taiwan. Futures studies is the field educators need to draw on if they wish to bring a futures dimension into the school curriculum through teaching materials and professional training and development.

## **Futures movements**

These include initiatives and programmes which have a direct or indirect wish to change the future, e.g. Green politics, the theory and practice of alternative lifestyles, alternative technology, creation of sustainable communities, 'new age' culture and values, personal growth movements, envisioning workshops. It should be noted that few, if any, such initiatives use the term 'futures movements' as such although that is part of their focus.

New social movements (NSMs), e.g. the anti-nuclear, anti-globalisation, human rights, peace and environmental movements, similarly would not use the term although at heart they aim to change the future through the generation of new cultural values and alternative lifestyles, practising the changes that they seek to achieve. Such movements and initiatives provide glimpses of preferable futures and offer guidelines towards their realisation, their proponents living as if they were experiments from the future.

## **3. FUTURES STUDIES**

Futures studies (FS) is the academic discipline that lies at the heart of the futures field (Masini, 2002; Lombardo, 2006). To illustrate its concerns I will draw on the views of three key practitioners in the field: Sohail Inayatullah, Wendell Bell and James Dator.

### **Sohail Inayatullah**

Sohail Inayatullah works at Tamkang University in Taiwan and the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia ([www.metafuture.org/](http://www.metafuture.org/)). He succinctly notes that:

Futures studies largely straddles two dominant modes of knowledge - the technical concerned with predicting the future and the humanist concerned with developing a good society (Inayatullah, 1993: 236)

He suggests three frames of reference for viewing the future/futures studies: i) the *predictive*: attempts to predict and control the future; ii) the *interpretive*: explores how different discourses and cultures approach and create the future; iii) the *critical*: makes problematic the categories used to construct the future.

## **Wendell Bell**

Wendell Bell, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Yale, describes the purposes of futures studies thus – 'To discover or invent, examine and evaluate, and propose possible, probable and preferable futures. Futurists seek to know: what can or could be (the possible), what is likely to be (the probable), and what ought to be (the preferable)' (Bell, 2004: 73). Bell is author of a seminal 2-volume work *Foundations of Futures Studies* (2004). He itemises five aims (Vol. 1, pp. xix-xxiii) in writing these two books.

1. To show that futures studies exists as an identifiable sphere of intellectual activity that has already made - and continues to make - important contributions to the knowledge base of modern society ...
2. To create a teaching instrument that can be used, especially in colleges and universities, both as a basic text for core courses in futures studies and as supplemental reading in other courses.
3. To futurize the thinking in other disciplines, both because their disciplines would benefit from expanding their time perspectives to include the future and because futures studies would benefit from the related futures-orientated work of scholars and scientists from other disciplines.
4. To contribute to the further development and improvement of futures studies.
5. To provide tools to empower both ordinary people and leaders to act so as to create better futures for themselves and their societies than they otherwise would be able to do.

## **Jim Dator**

James Dator teaches futures studies at the University of Hawaii and is responsible for the Hawaiian Research Center for Futures Studies ([www.futures.hawaii.edu](http://www.futures.hawaii.edu)). Here are what Dator calls his 'Laws of the future'.

The future cannot be studied because the future does not exist. Futures studies does not - or should not - pretend to study the future. It studies ideas about the future (what I usually call 'images of the future') which each individual and group has (often holding several conflicting images at one time). These images often serve as the basis for actions in the present. Individual and group images of the future are often highly volatile and change according to changing events or perceptions. They often change over one's lifetime. Different groups often have very different images of the future. Men's images may differ from women's. Western images may differ from non-Western...

The future cannot be predicted, but alternative futures can, and should be forecast. Thus, one of the main tasks of futures studies is to identify and examine the major alternative futures which exist at any given time and place. The future cannot be predicted, but preferred futures can and should be envisioned, invented, implemented, continuously evaluated, revised, and re-envisioned. Thus, another major task of futures studies is to facilitate individuals and groups in formulating, implementing, and re-envisioning their preferred futures. Part of the activity we do in futures studies is helping people in envisioning a more plausible future than they might otherwise. And we do it by giving them a greater range of images, by helping them to choose the way they want the future to be so that they can move in the right direction (Dator, 2005).

### **Some applications of futures studies**

Whilst futures studies is one of the academic fields that underpins this teaching unit it does not mean that its procedures and processes are not also valuable in everyday life. Here are five questions that you could consider in relation to your life now and in the future.

- What are the different scenarios for your personal future? How will you choose which is preferable?
- What criteria will/do you use in planning your professional future? Do any relate to the contribution you might make towards creating a better world?
- What are the probable and preferable futures for your local community? What are the drivers for change here? Do some need to be opposed and others supported?
- What will be the impact on your children/the children you teach of increased energy use at home and at school?
- What are you doing to try and lessen the future impact of climate change? What do you know about the different scenarios that you and your children may have to face?

This session has outlined the emergence of the futures field after World War Two and has, in particular, focused on the academic field of futures studies and its contribution to thinking to more critically and creatively thinking about the future.

## REFERENCES & KEY READING (\*)

(\*) Bell, W. (2004) *Foundations of Futures Studies*, 2 vols. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers

(\*) Dator, J. (2005) Foreword, to *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, CD-ROM, Brisbane: Foresight International

Inayatullah, S. (1993) From 'who am I?' to 'when am I?' Framing the shape and time of the future, *Futures*, 25 (3): 235-253

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[www.metafuture.org/articles.htm](http://www.metafuture.org/articles.htm)

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(\*) Slaughter, R. (ed) (2005) *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, CD-ROM Professional Edition, Brisbane: Foresight International. At:  
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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether you are reading this for your own interest, sharing this material with others or using it as an aid to your teaching this session raises questions about the nature and purposes of futures studies. After checking 'Discussion skills in groups' jot down your responses to the following questions:

1. What do you understand the aims of future studies to be?
2. Why is it important to have a notion of the 'good society'?

After discussing each question (it is useful to agree in advance how long to spend on each) list on a flipchart the main responses arising in the group. What similarities are there, what differences? What might be the possible origins of these? What further reading might be useful?