

## 9. ENVISIONING PREFERABLE FUTURES

### ➤ LECTURE NOTES

#### **Preferred futures**

- One of the central concerns of futures studies
- The crucial importance of images and imaging

#### **Futures workshops**

- Pioneering work of Fred Polak
- Vision and action go together

#### **Some research findings**

- Elise Boulding's notion of a 'baseline future'
- The nature of students' preferred futures

### ➤ KEY READING

- Hicks, D. (2006) Always coming home: identifying educators' desirable futures ([Downloads](#))

### ➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the key features of your preferred future for society?
2. What action is needed in order to bring such changes about?

### ➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Able to identify key features of one's own preferred future
- Able to critically relate this to wider initiatives for social change

## LECTURE NOTES

### 1. PREFERRED FUTURES

#### Futures studies

In Session 3 the importance placed in futures studies on the ability to identify preferred futures was particularly stressed (Jones, 1998). Jim Dator, director of the Hawaii Research Centre for Futures Studies, explains:

Futures studies tries to help people in becoming more active in envisioning a preferred future. To teach them to find the way they would want the future to be, and to act in their personal lives, business, or governments in order to achieve a better future. So, 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 they can move in the right direction (Dator, 2006).

#### Fred Polak

Polak was a Dutch sociologist who carried out a major historical study of images of the future in western society. As a result of this work one of his conclusions was that such images act as a mirror of the times. By this he meant not only that people's concerns necessarily reflect the times they live in, but that the pessimism or optimism of their future images also said something about the health and well-being of their society at that historical period.

He felt that there was a close correlation between the rise and fall of images of the future and the rise and fall of society and culture itself. As long as a society's images of the future are positive and flourishing, he argued, they act like a magnet drawing society on towards its envisioned future. Once such images begin to decay and lose their vitality however, it seemed that the culture could not survive long. Writing in the 1950s Polak saw the mid-20th century as a unique period in only possessing negative images of the future. Fifty years later, in the first decade of the 21s century, positive images of the future are still not always easy to come by. It is possible, however, to discern a shift beginning which stresses the need for individuals and institutions to envision more sustainable futures, which could suggest a return of hope after the traumas (e.g. two world wars and the nuclear arms race) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. FUTURES WORKSHOPS

### Robert Jungk

As result of Polak's work several futurists became interested in working with images of the future and developing various strategies for doing this. One of earliest proponents was Robert Jungk, a major European futurist who, with Johan Galtung, helped found the World Futures Studies federation (WFSF). In *Future Workshops: How to create desirable futures* Jungk writes:

I was a victim of Hitler's regime, leaving Germany in '33. I felt powerless about the holocaust ...Ever since then I have looked for ways that people can fight back and can influence the course of events. The future workshop is just such a way. It helps people to develop creative ideas and projects for a better society. For trying to resist something is just part of the story. It is essential for people to know what they are fighting for, not just what they are fighting against (Jungk and Mullert, 1987:5).

From the early 1960s onwards Jungk ran workshops all over Europe with a wide range of community, business, government and activist groups. Such groups generally had a particular problem that they wished to resolve in order to create their preferred future. Workshops lasted for a day, weekend, or longer, and had four main phases - *Preparatory Phase*: participants state why they have come and what their interests are; *Critique Phase*: complaints and criticisms are collected in order to identify the key components of the problem; *Fantasy Phase*: processes such as brainstorming are used to generate a series of 'utopian schemes' that might help resolve the problem; *Implementation Phase*: the most popular suggestions for action are identified and checked for practicability. At a *Continuing Workshop* participants finalise their detailed action plans for the future.

Whilst these phases may sound a little dry, they come alive in the comments that Jungk made about his experiences. At first he didn't realise how difficult it would be to get people to think creatively about the future. Sometimes groups were hostile towards him because they expected him to provide the answers whilst he saw his task as helping them find their own answers. Often people were passive, he realised, because of 'the hostility of our social environment to anything from the realm of the imagination.'

'In our discussion', he wrote, 'we relived the shattering of children's worlds and the entombment of their imagination. We found, in so doing, we were able to dig it out, somewhat the worse for wear but still alive amid the debris of all the derided and trampled dreams' (Jungk and Mullert, 1987:17). In particular Jungk stresses the need to liberate the intuitive and emotional in these workshops as well as using the rational and analytic. The most constructive solutions, he found, often came from clumsily expressed yearnings and dreams rather than the use of 'scientific' logic. Whether it was a mining community due for re-settlement, a group concerned about the social

impact of computer technology or problems of urban living, Jungk found that people's creativity could be tapped to envision their preferred futures and then to act on them.

## **Warren Ziegler**

In the USA Warren Ziegler has worked since the early 1970s to popularise the notion of futures workshops. Like Jungk he worked with a wide range of groups, from business executives and urban planners to hospital trustees and city councils, but using a somewhat wider repertoire of processes for envisioning preferred futures than Jungk. He wrote:

I call futures-invention an art, a craft, a discipline, a set of practices. Put together, these become an approach to the future which we adopt in order to bring about a future different from what it might otherwise be were we not to intervene, deliberately and creatively, in the present to 'invent' it (Ziegler, 1989).

He stresses that the most important thing about the future is not what we know (i.e. forecasting) but what we intend, for from intention comes action. Workshop participants are invited to discover their intentions towards the future by engaging in the practice of imaging. Such imaging/guided visualisation is used to identify the details of a group's preferred future. 'The future...is an act of the imagination. Our aim...is to discern our intentions towards the future so as to shed light on our present situation and provide guidelines for changing our actions so as to move towards that intended future'.

The process of envisioning that Ziegler used is described in *Envisioning the Future: A mindbook of exercises for futures-inventors* (1989). It contains a variety of exercises which stretch and extend the participant's imaging skills. Detailed scenarios are built up at first individually and then in groups to create shared visions of the preferred future. Careful attention is paid to how scenarios connect to the present and the action needed to bring them about. His workshops had five stages: i) the discerning of concerns; ii) focused imaging; iii) creating a shared vision; iv) connecting the future with the present; v) strategy paths and action.

## **Elise Boulding**

Elise Boulding's interest in futures workshops came from translating Fred Polak's work into English which then led to collaboration with Ziegler in the 1980s. In working with peace activists Boulding came to realise that although they were clear about what they *opposed* they found it very difficult to visualise what they were *for*. In short such activists found it difficult to imagine what a world without nuclear weapons might actually look like. It is the envisioning process developed by Elise Boulding which I have used in my own work and which is described in chapters 5, 6 and 8 of *Lessons for the Future*.

### 3. SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### A baseline future

Elise Boulding is one of the few people to have detailed the outcomes of futures workshops and to have analysed the futures imagery that arises. In particular she notes the presence of several common themes (Boulding, 1994: 73-74).

Whatever people are doing, women and men are doing it together. Children and the elderly seem to be everywhere - there is no age segregation. Communities are also described as racially mixed. Learning seems to take place 'on the job'...This is a non-hierarchical world; no one is 'in charge'. It is also one in which locality is very important ...Technology is low profile, but it does exist and everyone reports that it is shared...Although the new-consciousness theme varies in importance, there is widespread reporting that people are operating out of a different sense of awareness than that of (the present).

She describes this as a 'baseline future', common to most imaging groups that she worked with. Two other images she reports, although not universal ones, are a sense of boundarylessness (a greater flow of people and ideas unimpeded by formal structures) and the use of the adjectives bright, clean, green to describe this preferred future world. She suggests that the recurrence of such images, regardless of participant's background, might indicate some 'deep structures at work in the futures-imaging process that should be more fully explored.

#### The envisioning imperative

Meadows, in *Limits to Growth: The 30-year update*, writes:

Visioning means imagining, at first generally and then with increasing specificity, what you really want. That is, *what you really want*, not what someone has taught you to want, and not what you have been willing to settle for. Visioning means taking off the constraints of 'feasibility', of disbelief and past disappointments, and letting your mind dwell upon its most noble, uplifting, treasured dreams ... We should say immediately, for the sake of sceptics, that we do not believe vision makes anything happen. Vision without action is useless. But action without vision is directionless and feeble. Vision is absolutely necessary to guide and motivate. More than that, vision, when widely shared and firmly kept in sight, does *bring into being new systems* (Meadows, Meadows and Randers, 2005: 272).

This is the art which both futurists and educators need to practice with their clients and students so that the notion of envisioning preferable futures becomes more widely known and used. How can one imagine a more sustainable future if one has not developed the skills of envisioning? So much time is spent, quite rightly, in investigating the causes, nature and consequences of local-global issues but then, on the basis of that, action is planned. Up until recently the missing element has been practical examples of envisioning sustainable futures, particularly in relation to peak oil, climate change and the limits to growth. However, examples of such envisioning can now be found in chapters 5 to 8 of *Lessons for the Future* (Hicks, 2006), *The Transition Handbook* (Hopkins, 2008), *The Transition Timeline* (Chamberlin, 2009) and *The Transition Companion* (Hopkins, 2011).

In order to achieve any element of real success the human endeavour would benefit from a greater awareness and understanding of both futures studies and futures education.

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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 need to envision our preferable societal futures as a guide to wiser action. After checking 'Discussion skills in groups' jot down your response to the following questions:

1. What are the key features of your preferred future for society?
2. What action is needed in order to bring such changes about?

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?