



Essay

Navigating the Maze of Futures Studies - a reflexive outlook

Simon Önnared^{1, *}, Valeriy Chichilanov²

¹ Department of Innovation Management, Mälardalen University, Eskilstuna, Sweden.

² Independent Researcher, Bangkok, Thailand.

Abstract

Emerging as a futurist and positioning oneself as such is a nuanced and difficult path to navigate. In this paper we explore our experiences as aspiring foresight professionals using our experiences and insights through collaborative autoethnography, to explore our collective futures in the field and going through hindsight to foresight. We discuss the challenges pertaining to theorizing in futures studies and foresight; positioning oneself as a researcher or practitioner; and seeking employment. Together these discussions form a narrative of overcoming challenges and deliberating between dilemmas. We hope that the insights shared within this paper can support others on this journey.

Keywords

Futures of futurists, collaborative autoethnography, positioning, professionalization.

Introduction

Literature has brought up the question of theory building in foresight and futures studies multiple times (see e.g., Karlsen, Øverland, & Karlsen, 2010; Piirainen & Gonzalez, 2015; Minkkinen, 2020; Fernani & Chermack, 2021), where some view the process as a practice and others consider it a science (Popp, 2013; Alács, 2013). As such it is far from coherent and can be difficult to grasp. Reflecting upon our own novice yet fresh experiences in the field, we hope to contribute valuable insights for navigating the challenges and dilemmas in this field. Prior literature has taken similar approaches to understanding the inner game of futures studies (Ramos, 2015); connected ethnography and experiential futures (Candy & Kornet, 2019); and taking a collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) approach to cultural futures (Stohry & Jackson, 2019). This essay takes a CAE approach to explore the outer game of futures and the futures thereof.

This CAE approach, through collective exploration, enrichment, deeper learning, and community building, adds accuracy to an otherwise solo autoethnographic inquiry (Chang et al., 2012). Through this inquiry, we show how two aspiring futurists, foresight professionals, or whatever you call it, examine and describe their shared stories and experiences. This approach uses our insights of the past to make sense of the present, and re-envisioning our futures (Custer, 2014), taking us from hindsight to foresight, contributing with a reflective yet forward-oriented perspective on the challenges of positionality in futures studies and foresight. Beginning with a more thorough description of our methodological approach, this essay takes us through our personal and shared experiences diving into the field of futures studies, academia, and business, from which we explore possible pathways of professional development.

Methodology

This study takes us from hindsight (autoethnography) to foresight (futures studies). An intrinsic part of an autoethnographic approach is the use of hindsight to selectively reflect upon personal experiences and finding epiphanies, or canon events that profoundly shape us (Ellis et al., 2011). Foresight, on the other hand, flips this to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: simon.onnered@mdu.se (S. Önnared).

its side, subverting personal experiences to explore the possibilities of the trajectories of events and trends into possible futures. However, for the purposes of this study, we retain our subjective personal experiences by being “self-focused, researcher-visible, context-conscious, and critically dialogic” (Chang et al., 2012). We thereby acknowledge the subjective nature of this inquiry and the influences that create value-laden narratives of our past and futures (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015).

Using this as input and our collective scanning in our fields as data to build an outlook on the possible futures of futurists. The framework for this follows a combination of analytical-interpretative reflection with prospection (Chang et al., 2012; Voros, 2003). As such, it is an alteration of Voros’ (2003) framework that combines CAE with foresight. For which, the input for analysis became our personal memories, archival materials, self-observation, and reflection. This was analyzed and interpreted through individual and group writing, theme-searching, contrasting with literature, probing, and meaning-making; from which we generated an outlook on our emerging futures. We also apply Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) to deepen our understanding of the systems which we have been a part of, how our worldviews have changed over time, and the myths and metaphors we have told ourselves (Inayatullah, 2017), see fig 1. From this CAE process, stories and writing were merged to create a cohesive narrative, whilst respecting each researcher’s experience and reality.

Inception

Our two stories begin in different places but quickly come together to form a shared experience. Simon had come across foresight through his undergraduate studies, it was a normal course that for us entailed a collaborative element with industry. An inherent component of our education was the collaborative aspect between academia, industry, and the public sector which permeated our studies. With the old proverb “it is what you make of it” in the back of our heads, Simon wanted to make an impression. Therefore, he approached this first project with an ambition to produce novel insights. This deliberate effort proved fruitful, despite the insights not being novel to the client, they were under secrecy and enough to leave an impression. This impression created a sense of validation of one’s abilities and motivation to continue, and the effort thereof would show itself to be valuable many years after the fact. Valeriy on the other hand, discovered foresight through a speculative futures conference in his search for thesis opportunities for his master’s degree. Finding which, was a serendipitous Google result following keyword searches which combined past experiences from marketing, design, and innovation. This conference sparked an interest, and a few months later this interest started to materialize upon finding a call for thesis projects from IKEA, the Swedish furniture conglomerate, which specifically called for foresight and expressed value for people from a range of disciplines. Meanwhile, Simon was more interested in pursuing his path towards the energy sector yet struggling with his lack of technical qualifications. What employers viewed as a scenario designer or systems analyst, was different from the skillset that we possessed. In the end, we approached IKEA as a team and successfully secured the opportunity to work on the project.

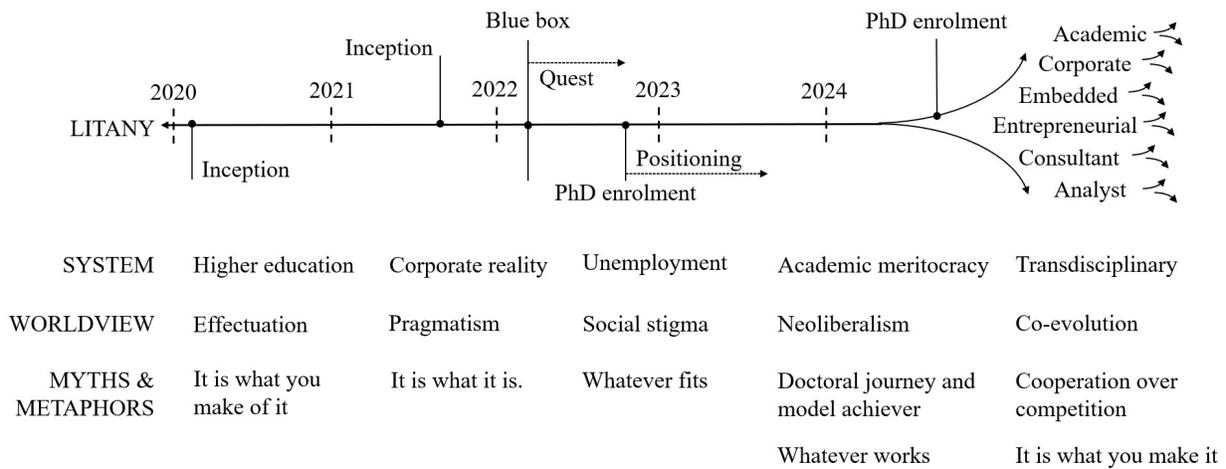


Fig. 1: Approximate timeline of journey from inception to future outlook, showing Valeriy’s on top and Simon’s beneath. Below is a rough CLA over the main phases of our journey.

The Blue Box

We had gotten the opportunity to work for IKEA due to our complementary skills and interesting field (Innovation & Design), however, due to our examiners’ prior experience, we were poised to write two separate theses, whilst collaborating on the same project. A challenge at the time, however, a valuable lesson for future work. Valeriy was an experienced marketer in a relevant industry, and Simon was more experienced with foresight; these were the complementary skills that ended up giving us the position. Now faced with managing the tri-interests of producing two novel theoretical contributions and meeting the practical expectations of the client. Hence, we early on faced the dilemma of change management contra theory development (Ellström et al., 2020), and the conceptual versus empirical approaches (Martinez, 2022). We struggled to keep the future studies in the thesis, for Simon, it ended up in the appendix, whereas Valeriy managed to retain it in the main body, viewing the foresight as the methodology, and the insights as the results. Simon’s on the other hand reflected a more traditional theoretical approach in innovation management, whilst his heart lay in the foresight. This was a divergence primarily influenced by the academic backgrounds of our supervisors, who were six in total, two shared and two for our respective theses which drove our theses in different directions.

What we then delivered to our collaborative client was a well-designed, methodologically sound, and in-depth report on our inquiry into the futures of retail. We had managed to fulfil the expectations of both our client and academic supervisors, but now only remained the final challenge, turning opportunity into employment. Facing the hard truth that there were no jobs for us, out of 13000 positions globally at IKEA, the category of “Exploration, Co-Creation & Innovation” resulted in 0, and hence the phrase “it is what it is”. However, this did not deter us, because through this process we found our calling, and became confident in our ability to achieve it.

The Quest for Employment

We later learned that one does not simply become a foresight professional. As a prominent futurist so harshly put it to Valeriy during a conference: “You have to start somewhere else, then you can become a futurist”. Scouring the internet for jobs we soon learned that entry-level positions were few and far between. We thought we’d be the most qualified for such positions, we were enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and educated, all with an eye on the future. We feared the prospect of being unemployed, knowing the self-reinforcing cycle that it could create. We would tailor our stories to suit whichever application would conceivably fit and anything remotely related would suffice. The

ones we found and applied to rarely rendered a response, these employers carried a different language than the one we had been taught, one of business intelligence jargon in contrast to our more abstract skillset. Listings that aligned better were PhD positions and management consultancies, both highly competitive. PhD positions could appear to be a great fit, but the managing employer, coming from a different school of thought, did not view experiences the same and sometimes did not even call for an interview. Consultancy positions saw the potential for oneself; however, the positions ultimately went to some prior intern; showcasing the importance of networks and practical experience. So does the position where Simon ended up, at the same university from which he graduated, where the employer knew of his capabilities and experience.

Valeriy relocated to Thailand for family reasons and faced multiple choices of either pursuing a PhD, returning to the marketing profession, or doing something completely new, e.g., starting teaching or pursuing an entrepreneurial pathway. However, still persistent and disregarding the advice that “you have to start somewhere”, a series of unsuccessful efforts were made to pursue foresight positions, two local vacancies were identified, but none led to an interview. The situation was significantly better with applications for PhD positions, which resulted in three interviews, however, it ended there. Eventually, an opportunity emerged to return to Valeriy’s marketing roots, this time in the EdTech industry, bringing some relief but also more concerns as the startup environment fails to provide long-term employment (Lipinski, 2017). Therefore, the search continued, leading to a job in teaching and finally, a PhD position.

One Painting, Many Frames

Broadening our search exacerbated the challenge of positioning our skills as relevant. Even though those positions contained similar tasks, the language, tools, and experience differentiated, whilst simultaneously having to navigate the cultural and linguistic nuances of these types of roles. This created a challenge of positioning oneself such that it resonated with the respondent. The activity of environmental scanning, a fundamental trait of a futures-oriented person, is one conducted through the widest range of methods, by the widest range of people (Hiltunen, 2008). Scholars publishing in futures-related journals come from a breadth of backgrounds and disciplines; and those applying the methods of foresight do so in various roles, positions, outlets, and companies. These practitioners and scholars do not necessarily identify themselves as futurists nor foresight professionals. Hence, this journey can be embarked upon from a wide array of professions. Simon, now an interdisciplinary researcher, now faces the challenge of positioning (or not positioning) in academia. Given the uncertainty of the future, we find it wise to specialize without being exclusive, choosing a path but closing no doors and doing “whatever fits”.

The startup environment Valeriy found himself in is highly data-driven and entrepreneurial, as some companies put it, a) data leads our decisions and b) we operate at a rapid pace and try new approaches, which understandably shows a pragmatic orientation of the business. In this setting, the knowledge lasts for a short time in the present and lasts until new evidence surfaces, revealing its falsehood or inadequacy. It mirrors the entrepreneurial mechanism of time-bound experiences that forces you to collect meaningful experiences and master skills of extracting knowledge from them (Hägg & Kurczewska, 2021). So, Valeriy’s “reality” is the practical consequences of ideas, based on “true” theories and knowledge that enable successful action, initiated, and sustained by his doubts and beliefs using methods that lead to practical solutions and outcomes (Saunders et al., 2019). So, Valeriy has come to believe “whatever works” to be true., a latent foresight practitioner in this startup environment, who may unnoticeably deliver insights, but often “cannot claim to know how and why exactly the results and impacts came about” (Pirainen & Gonzalez, 2015).

The Practitioner, Researcher Continuum

As in action research, autoethnography, and futures studies alike, the line between practitioner and researcher becomes blurred (Holian & Coghlan, 2013; Chang et al., 2012; Popp, 2013). One faces the critique of masquerading as a researcher when focusing on real-world change rather than producing generalizable knowledge (Ellström et al., 2020). As such, one more resembles a consultant rather than an academic researcher (ibid). The action research school of thought tells us that one purpose of our research is to transform our world; whereas a more traditional

view tells us that a PhD is your driver's license to become an academic researcher and that it is the journey thereto which is important. This dichotomy can be seen to be slowly changing; however, it still creates a problem of positioning oneself to fit in into certain research areas and their paradigms. Popp (2013) expands upon this discussion, arguing that the delineation between the two is that researchers adhere to a set of principles, such as transparent disclosure of methodology; engaging with the scientific community; and discussing appropriate quality criteria, amongst other hygiene factors. The author argues that much participatory futures research fails to fulfil these criteria (Popp, 2013). We too have faced this dilemma, striving to position ourselves as researchers when the line to be consultants is thin (see, Önnered, 2022; Chichilanov, 2022). Over-adapting to the expectations of reviewers and partnering organizations, we became disciplined by them rather than empowered to push for the system-level change we aspire (Yin & Guanglun, 2023).

Attempting to abide by both sides, we doubled the work, output, and expectations as we wrote both academic and practical reports. This duality can be understood through a comment mentioned by Öner (2010) that foresight is the process (and a capacity) to be understood, whereas futures studies is the product of the process. Thereby, a study in either discipline can result in two outputs, corresponding with the levels of theorizing either in or of foresight (Pirainen & Gonzalez, 2015). Spaniol & Rowland (2022a; 2022b) published two papers based on one project which serves as an ample example of this strategy; with one domain-specific study published in *Marine Policy* focusing on future innovations (Spaniol & Rowland, 2022a) and another in *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, which focuses more on the use of foresight as an aligning activity (Spaniol & Rowland, 2022b). Though this is not always possible, partnering organizations may view data of insights and intelligence as confidential, thus restricting what can be published, resulting in a focus on the process study. Another approach to managing this duality is through an action research approach (Holian & Coghlan, 2013; Ramos, 2017; Inayatullah, 2006), wherefrom you can achieve both practical and scholarly impact, and choosing your publishing outlets depending on your sought-after impact (Hoppe, 2019). However, adhering to multiple disciplines and domains requires grasping multiple languages, bodies of knowledge, and nomenclature, amongst also navigating different traditions and paradigms. Futurists tend to be generalists as this line of work requires a broad understanding of the world (Inayatullah, 2017); however, we find that PhD positions oftentimes require domain-specific expertise to get through the door. Whilst the field itself struggles with professionalization (Hines & Gold, 2013), so do we as aspirants.

Futures of Futurists

So, then we ask ourselves, what are the futures of us, or rather the futures of futurists? Based on our reflections and experiences, we provide an outlook on our collective futures. Reality reflects our purview on the practitioner-researcher dilemma, as most professionals that we read about and interact with combine aspects of both worlds. However, choosing to balance this act of researcher and practitioner can become a challenge. External influence can coerce you towards certain directions, such as supervisors, clients, collaborators, editors, and reviewers. Then comes your personal experiences, assumptions, and worldviews that may make you favor one side over the other; and societal and cultural factors which influence how we perceive them through the narratives they create (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). We see several changes affecting our outlook on what it might entail to be a futurist in the future. Organizations in Sweden slowly began diverging from commissioning foresight reports, towards facilitating and creating processes and building their own foresight capacity (Wahlström, 2012). There is a growing push for futures literacy, which is seen as a critical skill for achieving sustainable development goals (UNESCO, 2017; Jordan, 2021), and we are observing trends such as introducing futures thinking in earlier stages of education (Teach the Future, 2023). The concept of collective intelligence is a growing trend affecting policy development, where the masses partake in policy debate and creation (European Commission, 2022). Therefore, we view future futurists as the many, following the proliferation of futures literacy, we expect futurists to be a declining specialized profession, or rather a title. However, this proliferation must be evenly distributed so as to not fortify an otherwise already privileged future (Inayatullah, 1993). A future futurist can and perhaps should be embedded in your local politician, your neighbor, anyone, and everyone regardless of which future we might find ourselves in. Decolonizing the future and democratizing futures thinking. These are the skills of the 21st century, understanding complexity and anticipatory thinking, i.e., futures literacy. We therefore see our futures in positions with no reference to futures yet

applying its very principles in practice.

Conclusion

We are all willingly and unwillingly guided by the norms and influences of various formal and informal institutions that set the expectations for us, shaping our values and beliefs, our behavior, and our identity. Conducting collaborative autoethnography creates a peculiar time travel dynamic between the past and present, which serves as a catalyst towards thinking about the future (Bochner, 2012). We find this approach a valuable contribution to foresight, reflecting upon our pasts and assumptions. We hope that our struggles resonate with and can guide others contemplating embarking on this journey. Regardless of your career path, we call upon the young, emerging futurists, to be champions of futures literacy, for you are what our sustainable development requires. Position yourself where you will have your sought-after impact or fear having none, for we need to be the change agents for our futures. We should, therefore, leverage our youth, closer relation to the younger generations, and stake in a sustainable future. We can relate better to future generations, emerging technologies, and contemporary trends, and do not get discouraged by the “latent futurist” position you might find yourself in. For us this entails returning to an idea that the future is what we make it, it is for us to frame, and the futures of futurists are what you make them to be.

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