



Article

An Autoethnography of Swift Futuring in Practice

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study documents the inaugural application of Swift Futuring in a U.S. higher education institution from March 2023 to August 2024. The study is important for demonstrating how the Swift Futuring theory translates to practice and whether it contributes positively to organizational change amidst existential pressures and time constraints. Results from the autoethnography and a Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) suggest that Swift Futuring can serve as a valuable tool for these goals.

Keywords

Organizational Change, Futures Studies, Autoethnography, Scenario, Minority Serving Institution

Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries. – Carse (1986, p. 10)

Invitation

You, *homo narrans*, are invited to join a story of organizational change in progress. You may begin as a detached bystander but do not have to remain there. You may enter further as a curious inquirer or engage deeper as a thoughtful participant. Before long, you might find yourself no longer thinking *about* this story but *with* this story (Frank, 1995). Such is the potential and promise of the shared human experience and membership in this community of eager futurists. I will join you as I write, solve, and act my way into what's next.

Introduction

Swift Futuring addresses the question: “How might organizational stakeholders collectively define, influence, and reach a bold, even audacious, preferred future three to five years out, under significant existential pressures and time constraints?” (Arroyo, 2024, p. 73; Figure 1). The near-term focus of Swift Futuring distinguishes it from other futures approaches that posit decades-long time horizons. It relies on the innately human activity of participatory storytelling to spark and sustain shifts in organizational climate and culture needed to support authentic collective change.

At the heart of Figure 1 and central to the current study is the *visionary prototype scenario*, a tightly packaged story developed through robust stakeholder engagement to simulate an organization's preferred future state no more than three to five years out. Like any prototype it begins as a minimum viable product and evolves as stakeholders use it over time. To the extent a group of engaged stakeholders can generate a shared visionary prototype scenario quickly it can catalyze a waterfall of activity leading to a sea change in the organization's trajectory. The right scenario could create the right conditions for a preferred future. Every aspect of Figure 1 leads to and emanates from the visionary prototype scenario.

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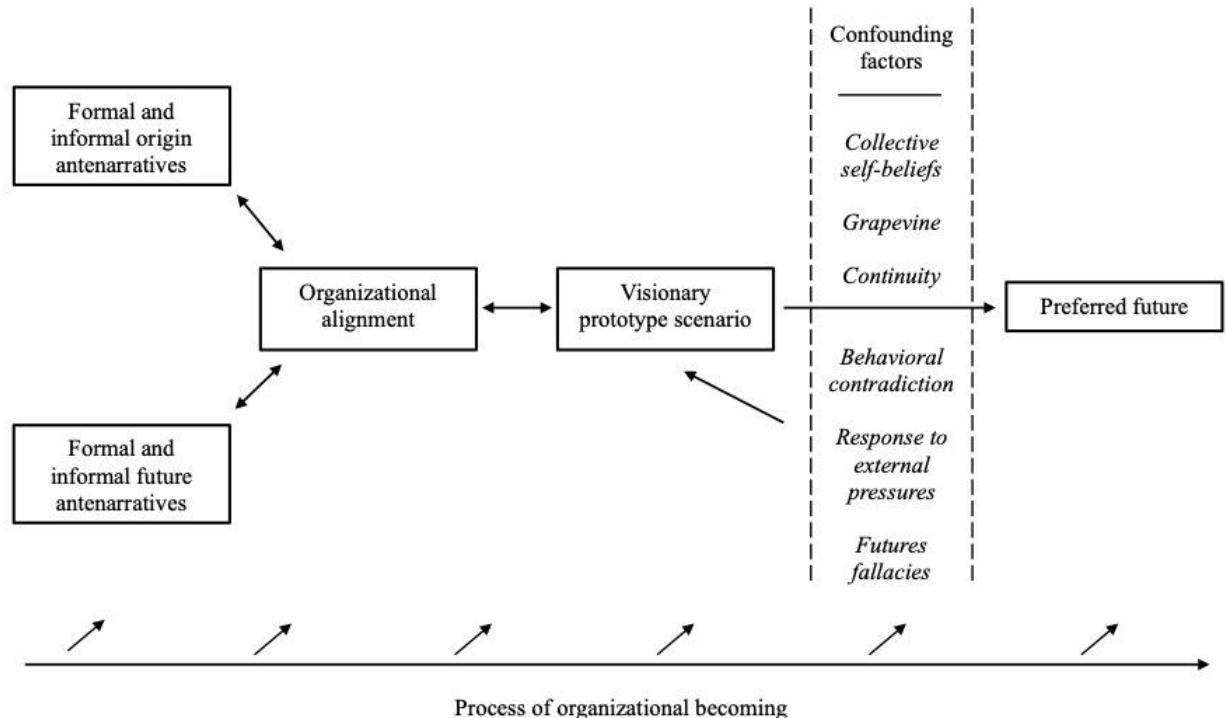


Fig. 1: Swift Futuring (Arroyo, 2024)

Research questions and overview

While writing the original framework I was concerned about translating theory to practice. Although an avid theorist, I am also pragmatic. Truth is what works, and what works is determined through experience (Rorty, 1999). I found myself in a skeptical dialogue with every sentence, knowing the harder work of application remained.

The current study is my first attempt to document what Swift Futuring looks like when applied in an organization. Using an autoethnographic research approach, I explore two research questions: How is a visionary prototype scenario developed in an organization? And, how did we change? The study concludes with insights for translating theory to practice including a Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 1998) to document and analyze the process and changes that occurred.

Research Method

Autoethnography, the qualitative research approach for the current study, has been defined as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical to the cultural, social, and political through the study of a culture or phenomenon of which one is a part, integrated with relational and personal experiences” (Ellingson, 2011, p. 599). My goal is to produce a piece of scholarship that is experiential, reflective, and disciplined, or what Wall (2016) calls a *moderate autoethnography* to tap into human experience with actionable insights while maintaining scholarly rigor.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness for autoethnographies can be established by appeal to a core question: “Instead of asking, how can this be true? we could ask, what if this were true? What then?” (Bochner, 2000, p. 267). This social construction of reality found in an autoethnography is consistent with the larger qualitative tradition which is continuously evolving, interpretive, unexpected, and relational much like the future (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Setting and positionality

Our setting is central academic affairs in the Office of the Provost at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, U.S.A from March 2023 to August 2024. Enrolling over 28,000 students in fourteen schools and colleges, VCU is a complex organization with a federal minority serving institution (MSI) designation, an academic medical center, and a Carnegie community engagement classification.

My role is Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs (SVP), starting as interim in March 2023 and then transitioning to permanent a year later following a national search. A large part of my job is designing and overseeing the metaphorical “academic operating system” that runs the university’s academic enterprise, from compliance to innovation. During the period covered in this study, my team grew from six to nearly 100 through a reorganization and has continued growing since.

My leadership approach is inspired by Carse’s (1986) notions of play and the infinite game. To the extent I can encourage less focus on zero-sum finite games, and more attention to the transcendent infinite game, the entire organization can thrive in any conditions. It’s a transformational mindset that seeks to move beyond the institutional jungle and chessboard to the mountain tops and star (Inayatullah & Sweeney, 2021). Positional authority takes on an entirely different meaning in this mindset: “where the finite player plays *to be powerful* the infinite player plays *with strength*” (Carse, 1986, p. 31). My goal is not to win, but to keep the play going with enthusiasm and optimism. “The finite play for life is serious; the infinite play of life is joyous. Infinite play resounds throughout with a kind of laughter... over what has surprisingly come to be possible with others” (p. 25). I seek to use my positional authority to catalyze and facilitate not command and control. The following prelude and five acts document my attempt to embody these leadership values while Swift Futuring in a period of major personal and collective change.

Crucially, at the time I became interim SVP, academic affairs and associated units were at an existential crisis point. Units operated more in silos than collaboration. Our reputation was associated with compliance, inefficiency and saying no more often than yes. For these reasons, collective morale was low although individuals were passionate about doing good work. The conditions were right for organizational change through Swift Futuring.

Swift Futuring in VCU Academic Affairs: A Prelude and Five Acts

In the pages that follow I provide an account of the Swift Futuring experiment with VCU Academic Affairs in a prelude and five acts.

Prelude: March - October 2023

This Prelude describes key events and decisions—the living laboratory—that contributed to the creation of Swift Futuring and where it was first applied.

March 2023. I’m serving as Assistant Vice Provost (AVP) when the Provost calls on me unexpectedly to serve as interim Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. Having joined the institution in 2019 as a director, in total I have nearly 30 years of diverse career experience in and outside higher education. But am I up to this task?

New pressures, new goals

Reluctantly, I accept the interim role and immediately make two decisions. First, I will continue concurrently as AVP. The benefit is being able to overhaul our core academic operating system quickly without needing to onboard a new person. The downside is 80-100 hour weeks for the next year. A startup mindset helps.

Second, I set three priorities and make them public at a meeting on March 10, 2023 (see Figure 2).

1. Empower the team through distributed leadership rather than micro management.
2. Collaborate more with other central units to deliver networked, coordinated service to our academic schools/colleges.
3. Enhance our service excellence to all stakeholders. I introduce the approach of “ACE-ing the stakeholder experience” through accuracy, creativity, and efficiency. That idea becomes a mantra to galvanize the team.

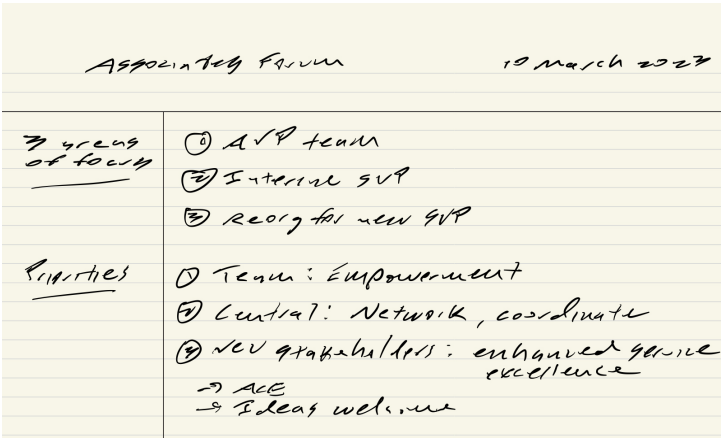


Fig. 2: Screenshot of handwritten notes from March 2023 outlining my interim SVP priorities for a public meeting

Mindset of play leads to Swift Futuring

Early May 2023. As the pressures of this new season mount and the size and scope of VCU Academic Affairs expands due to reorganizations, I begin sensing the need for a formal approach for participatory organizational change. Strategic planning right now would be premature and stultifying. We need a playful technique (Carse, 1986). A play perspective inspires me through the professional pressures of this interim season and creates the conditions for Swift Futuring’s emergence.

With strategic planning ruled out for now, I begin contemplating how principles from the futures studies literature, storytelling, antenarratives, and organizational theory might result in co-created scenarios for aspirational futures. Only one concept from futuring gives me pause. Mainstream futuring tends to use extended decades-long time horizons. I need to justify a much shorter time horizon but I’m not sure how to frame it. Then I come across Barker and Gower’s (2010) article on “swift communication” in multinational corporations, and Swift Futuring is born soon thereafter

Fast forward a few more months post-publication, and we join the story of how I experimentally applied Swift Futuring in VCU Academic Affairs.

Act one: November 2023

Summary of goals for act one

- Goal 1: Introduce the VCU Academic Affairs organization to Swift Futuring and the idea of co-creating a shared story (visionary prototype scenario).
- Goal 2: Catalyze stakeholders’ imaginations regarding their preferred three-year future state.

Re-enactment of my experience

It’s time to experiment with Swift Futuring in a real world case. VCU Academic Affairs seems like a good candidate based on our current state of flux. I simply must take care not to let my positional authority stifle grassroots ownership.

The stakes are high and time is short. Accounting for winter break, we have under six months to make significant progress because that’s when the provost intends to conclude the search for the permanent SVP, and I might not get the job. I will embrace the challenge and see what swift futuring is made of. The *kairos* feels right.

November 17, 2023. I’ve spent several hours meticulously composing an invitation for all members of my organization titled: “Swift Futuring for VCU Academic Affairs: Embracing Change and Crafting Our Future.” The message summarizes swift futuring and provides guidance for our kick-off exercise: “three-year stories.” Generative artificial intelligence (GAI) helps me refine my final draft and think through story writing tips. It’s my first time

using this technology for work, and I can see others using it as a tool during swift futuring sessions.

Participation is voluntary and will remain so for all Swift Futuring exercises. In this round participants will create a first-person story about the ideal state of their role or unit three years into the future, November 2026. The content itself isn't important, the process is. It's a warm up for organizational alignment (Figure 1) and practice for envisioning preferred futures.

November 28, 2023. It's the day of the kick-off meeting. We're hybrid, both in-person and on Zoom. Approximately 40 team members submitted a three-year story (Figure 3 displays an example). It's a great outcome. We are setting the right climate, and the stories are giving us windows into teammates' professional hopes and dreams. I also take quiet note that many are discussing GAI's usefulness in their story crafting efforts.

Contrary to my original facilitation plan, I don't invite much discussion about the stories during the meeting. Our time together is brief and the content isn't the intended focal point. The goal of this exercise was to catalyze an imaginative process for thinking about the future. I also want to push the boundaries on our thinking, to ensure we aren't thinking too small.

I say to the team: "Thank you for submitting so many stories. Now let me challenge your thinking. Do you really want to take three years to get there? Consider the possibility that your ideal future is really your ideal present (Bloom, n.d.). What immediate actions can you take to actualize your November 2026 vision sooner, thereby creating a baseline and freeing space for an ideal future you haven't yet imagined?"

"Here's another question. Is it possible that these November 2026 future states represent the future of your past instead of the future of your future? Harari (2017) has remarked that many of our current ideas about the future are clouded by the past 300 years. The real future will probably be completely different than our present-day vision can consider. We have to start somewhere, and we're setting a great baseline. I simply want to sober us regarding our limited vision and to open us for unexpected possibilities. Harari (2018) also asks a profound question that I'd encourage us all to ask as we are defining our collective aspirational future: What do we want to want?"

I sense receptivity among the team. People are giving good feedback already. Swift Futuring just might work in the real world.

But first, winter break.

Swift Futuring -November 2026, where are we now?

Saturday, November 21, 2026, dawned with a promise of innovation and transformation for the academic community at VCU. As I sipped my coffee, the warmth of the morning sun matched the excitement brewing within me. The past week had brought a pivotal approval – the creation of another career ladder that would redefine the educational landscape for our students.

The heart of our vision lay in empowering students to acquire essential skills while pursuing a full degree. Recognizing the demands of a world where everyone must navigate the challenges of a rising cost of living, we had developed a groundbreaking plan. Now, we proudly offered five full degree programs, each beginning with 8-week core courses tailored to match industry-specific needs.

What made these programs truly innovative were the 16-week courses that followed. These courses seamlessly blended essential skills with traditional liberal arts education, fostering the development of well-rounded individuals. It was a leap toward nurturing graduates who not only excelled in their fields but also possessed a broader perspective on life.

The growth of our team was integral to this vision. We acknowledged that expecting faculty members to not only be experts in their fields but also to engage in instructional design work was unrealistic. In response, we expanded our support system, ensuring that faculty could focus on imparting their knowledge effectively, while our dedicated team handled the intricacies of instructional design and online course development.

Back in 2024, we had embraced a model of sustainable course creation, a decision that had proved immensely successful. The flexibility we offered at VCU had become a beacon for students seeking quality education that adapted to their unique circumstances.

Our streamlined process for developing degrees and courses had paved the way for the introduction of micro-credentials, offering students a fast-track to acquiring targeted skills. By combining these credentials with other required courses, many students could now graduate in just three years. It was a testament to our commitment to flexibility and efficiency.

Crucially, VCU had been a leader in a broader movement. We had partnered with other universities, working alongside federal and state governments to reshape the education landscape. The collective goal was clear – to shift gears and make education more student-centered.

In the end, our focus remained unwaveringly on the students, viewing them not just as a source of revenue but as individuals striving to build better lives for themselves and their families. The vision we had prototyped was one where education wasn't just a means to a degree but a transformative journey, empowering students to thrive in a dynamic world. As the sun continued to shine brightly on that November day, I couldn't help but feel a profound sense of pride and optimism for the future of education at VCU.

Fig. 3: An example of a Swift Futuring story by a workshop participant Elaine Reeder, Ph.D. (Used with permission)

Act two: January - February 2024

Summary of goals for act two

- Goal 1: Reinforce the invitation to co-create a visionary prototype scenario to define our collective preferred future beyond our ideal present.
- Goal 2: Promote organizational alignment with fresh storytelling exercises.

Re-enactment of my experience

Happy New Year. Winter break is over. I'm feeling the pressure of the national search and our upcoming decennial reaffirmation of institutional accreditation. Swift Futuring promised to deliver results amidst "significant existential pressures" (Arroyo, 2024). This moment certainly fits. Let's press on.

January 8, 2024. It's the first team meeting of 2024. We're exclusively on Zoom. Today I need to wear two hats as organizational leader casting vision for 2024 and facilitator for Swift Futuring. Can one person do both well?

Trying to integrate my 2024 leadership vision with some stage-setting for Swift Futuring, I introduce the team to Conway's Law: Organizations are destined to design and produce systems that mirror their communications structure (Conway, 1968). Conway transformed my perspective about the connection between *how* we work and *what* we produce. If we want to deliver nimble, creative solutions leading to positive stakeholder experiences, then our internal communications structure must match. Swift Futuring can help us get there.

Looking at the clock, it's time to shift gears to facilitator mode and our first group exercise of the year: "What is our dragon?" The goal is to identify collective barriers to our future and inspire the adventurous hero within.

A soft spoken newer staff member raises her hand and offers a bold counterpoint which I recognized immediately from Campbell's (1972) seminal work: Typically the hero doesn't set out to be heroic. The hero is an average person who reluctantly responds to a challenge. The staff member's analysis is compelling and timely, speaking to who we are in academic affairs as an organization largely behind the scenes. Point taken. Let's focus on the dragon, and let heroism take care of itself.

I share a GAI generated image of a group fighting a dragon under the pressure of time (Figure 4). GAI underwhelmed me with its difficulty creating an eclectic demographic. The final image took a dozen attempts.



Image generated by Dall-E

Fig. 4: Dragon image I created with GAI to help the team envision the exercise

With time winding down and our next meeting being six weeks away, I try to prepare the group for extended asynchronous engagement. I implore them to stay with me because the outcome will be worth the effort. Afterwards I reiterate the dragon exercise in a follow up email (Figure 5).

Dear Team -

We're swift futuring now! It's really happening, and your participation is crucial to defining our collective story. We will be moving quickly so I hope you're ready.

Dragon-slaying

We asked the question at our last team meeting, "What is our dragon?" ([Video link](#), skip to 38:00). The responses give a collective sense of what we're up against, but now we need the details.

So, please write a very brief story that addresses the following:

1. What's the dragon standing in the way of?
 - Escaping a current place to a better place (just not sure where)
 - Defending an existing place of value
 - Advancing to a new place (and you know where you're going)
2. Where did the dragon come from?
3. Has anyone tried to slay the dragon but failed? What happened?
4. In your story, who proves to be the hero that slays the dragon, and how?

Be creative, use characters, play with voice, time and place. Let the sky be the limit.

Copy and paste your story [here on a new page](#). That way all of our stories will be in a single document. (It's located in our SVPAAs swift futuring folder.) You may choose to give your name in the story or remain anonymous.

Due date

Please upload by **February 1** because I will have one more asynchronous exercise for us before our next team meeting.

Fig. 5: Excerpt from a follow up email I sent on January 14, 2024

Final week of January 2024. Dozens of impressive dragon stories have been submitted. They consistently reflect known challenges, imagine characters that overcome them, and affirm the great work we can accomplish together.

I'm also hearing that many people are using GAI as a story development tool. It's helping people who don't typically view themselves as creative writers. An excerpt from one anonymous dragon story that used GAI invokes the notion of play and connects success to a healthy team:

... In the end, it wasn't a single person who vanquished the dragon. It was the heroism of an entire unit, armed not with weapons, but with the transformative power of thoughtful and diverse learning experiences. VCU, once clouded by the shadows of Burnout and Overlooked, now echoed with the laughter of engaged educators and the eager curiosity of students, thanks to the efforts of a refreshed and cared for team.

February 1, 2024. Riding the success of the dragon stories, now I introduce another group exercise by email (Figure 6). It's called "story harvesting." Story harvesting is designed to help us identify antenarratives, a crucial activity in visionary prototype scenario development (Figure 1). But the term antenarrative could be jargony for practitioners, so I opt for "grapevine." We need to illuminate what's on the grapevine so we can determine what to incorporate into our new story and what to leave behind.

The email links to a form with three questions. Later I will share the responses with the team. The three questions are:

1. What stories have you heard about us? In other words, what's on the grapevine?
2. What stories have you heard us tell about ourselves? In other words, what stories have we put into the grapevine?
3. In your ideal future, what do you wish the grapevine was saying about us?

Dear Team,

We submitted some incredible [dragon stories](#)! Please take a look. There's still time to submit one if you want. Alternatively, you can make comments in the document indicating agreement and/or adding detail to existing stories as another way of contributing.

Now for exercise 2. This one is super quick. I'm calling it "Story Harvesting." Ever heard the song, "I heard it through the grapevine?" The grapevine is an informal way people communicate. Grapevine communication can be true or false, but which it is really doesn't matter because it all feeds perception. And you know what they say about perception: it's reality.

So for this exercise, I'm asking you to do some [anonymous collective story harvesting](#) about us. *What's on the grapevine? What do we want to be on the grapevine?*

Story Harvesting is going to give us a realistic snapshot of where we are perception-wise as we craft our collective story.

Please complete this exercise by **Monday, February 12** so Tim and I have time to prepare for an engaging team meeting.

Many thanks.
Andrew

Fig. 6: Excerpt from an email I sent on February 1, 2024

As I click send, I'm questioning the wisdom of story harvesting asynchronously. We have worked hard to set a positive tone, and I'm concerned about giving much space to negative antenarratives. I already know that I won't do this asynchronously again in the future. But for now, there's no other option.

February 19, 2024. The next team meeting, and not a moment too soon. Today we use Zoom's breakout feature to promote discussion about the dragon stories and antenarratives.

I detect some weariness. Six weeks without live engagement, combined with opening space to negative grapevine stories, has led some members to feel disconnected and even deflated. It also doesn't help that our institutional accreditation site visit is next week so it's tough to focus on anything else. I project an upbeat persona because quitting is not an option. We are playing the infinite game. And it's comforting to remember that feelings of failure often characterize the midpoint of any journey. This sense of malaise is normal during major organizational change efforts.

Thankfully we are about to turn a positive corner.

Act three: March - April 2024

Summary of goals for act three

- Goal 1: Re-invigorate everyone's enthusiasm and belief that we can determine our preferred future together.
- Goal 2: Begin to define our visionary prototype scenario so people have something concrete to feel good about.

Re-enactment of my experience

Our accreditation site visit went perfectly thanks to a selfless team of professionals. And I just learned that I'm the sole finalist for the SVP job after four rounds of interviews. It's show time as they say.

March 7, 2024. Today I'm releasing the next Swift Futuring exercise: "six-word stories" (Figure 7). This exercise is designed to move us toward a memorable and simple visionary prototype scenario of our aspirational future in only six words. A minimum viable product of sorts.



Dear Team,

What's a six-word story? Glad you asked. It's the next tool we're going to use in our Swift Futuring process.

We are moving to the **visionary prototype scenario** part of the [model](#). The visionary prototype scenario is just as it sounds: It is a forward-looking and optimistic story in simple form -- i.e., a minimum viable product with just enough features to be useful to early adopters.

For that, our next exercise will be to create "six-word stories." In precisely six words *and only six words*, create a story of your preferred or aspirational future for the SVPAA unit. Here's a [brief explanation](#) of the six-word story narrative technique attributed to Hemingway.

Please submit your six-word story [here](#) by Friday, March 15. Write your story about the SVPAA unit overall so we can strengthen our alignment. This will be a shift. Up to this point we haven't focused explicitly on the SVPAA unit. Now we're making that pivotal shift.

Fig. 7: Excerpt from an email describing the six-word story

March 18, 2024. Team meeting on Zoom. The team's energy is positive, a relief after the February 19 low point. A total of 29 six-word stories have been submitted to the shared folder (Table 1). More stories would be nice, but the stories are perfect examples and enough to carry us forward.

Volunteers begin sharing their stories and the meaning behind them. Several acknowledge using a GAI tool. I reveal my personal favorite: "They were asleep. And then BOOM!" In true prototype fashion, the six-word stories are acting as test models for a shared aspirational future.

April 4, 2024. Our next task is to condense 29 six-word stories into one that everyone can own as our inaugural visionary prototype scenario. To help us get there, I send an email inviting individuals to vote on their top three six-word stories. The email links to an anonymous form. We will reveal the results in May.

Act four, penultimate exercise: May 2024

Summary of goals for act four

- Goal 1: Report the six-word story votes and GAI-aided thematic analysis.
- Goal 2: Facilitate further participatory refinement of the six-word stories.

Re-enactment of my experience

May 20, 2024. Team meeting on Zoom. First I share the voting results (Table 1). Although 36 votes are displayed here, 40 individuals voted in the end.

Table 1: Six-word stories ranked highest to lowest by popular vote.

Six Word Stories (<i>n</i> = 29)	Frequency	Percent
Change was embraced, and everyone survived.	8	22.2%
An aspirational future, entirely possible now.	7	19.4%
Education evolves, minds flourish, futures thrive.	7	19.4%
Organized chaos disappears, organized efficiency prevails.	6	16.7%
They launch into the deep joyously.	5	13.9%
A VCU all stakeholders can trust.	5	13.9%
People come before policy and protocol.	5	13.9%
Some say “someday,” but why wait?	5	13.9%
Listen, observe, ask, process, communicate, act.	5	13.9%
Yesterday’s learners, today’s researchers, tomorrow’s leaders.	4	11.1%
Achieving results with our combined talents.	4	11.1%
Academic innovation for student learning.	4	11.1%
My colleagues brought out my best.	4	11.1%
Bright future: learn, innovate, lead, inspire.	3	8.3%
Efficiency is the future is now.	3	8.3%
Communicate and be in the know.	3	8.3%
Communication and collaboration create celebratory culture.	3	8.3%
Our team? We can do it!	3	8.3%
Because of us, we are unstoppable.	3	8.3%
Even stronger collaboration across the team.	2	5.6%
They are connected and supported trailblazers.	2	5.6%
VCU students thrive online; revelation unfolds.	2	5.6%
Stars align for students and staff.	2	5.6%
Care, support, consistency, focus, collaboration, excellence.	2	5.6%
Diverse minds forging ACE.	1	2.8%
Designers ignite passion	1	2.8%
Unyielding dreams, unfolding	1	2.8%
Our knowledge is power.	1	2.8%
They were asleep. And then BOOM!	0	0%

Next I show a slide with the top four results and GAI-developed themes with an image for each six-word story and theme (Figure 8). Of the various ways I’ve used GAI to date, this product has been most helpful. The synthesis function is helping us to boil down months of hard work to its very essence. By popular vote, the top four six-word stories in order are:

- Change was embraced, and everyone survived
- An aspirational future, entirely possible now
- Education evolves, minds flourish, futures thrive

- Organized chaos disappears, organized efficiency prevails

ChatGPT analysis of the top four six-word stories produced this graphic with these themes.



Fig. 8: GAI-generated analysis of top four six-word stories

After discussing the four scenarios and themes for a few minutes, participants go into Zoom breakout rooms with a single task: Synthesize these four into one and then report back. I encourage them to use GAI, though I suspect they would have regardless.

Everyone returns from their groups. Something surprising happens as spokespersons reveal their prototypes. All six stories are thematically similar, and five of them share the word *adapt*.

- We're good at doing new things.
- The ability to adapt and thrive.
- Embracing adaptability, transforming efficiency, thriving futures.
- Adapting operational excellence; embracing future growth.
- ADAPTS: Always developing, achieving potential, thriving successfully.
- ADAPTS: Adaptability, determination & audacity prove our team's success.

Retrospectively on the strategic landscape model, it was a moment of collective emergence—a “transformative event”—from the institutional jungle to a mountain top (Inayatullah & Sweeney, 2021). If I had been interviewed about my expectations for this swift futuring experiment back in November, never would I have predicted this point of convergence. I would have expressed hope that we would produce a shared story about our aspirational future, but I could not have foreseen this phenomenon of near-seamless coalescence around a single transformational word: *adapt*.

We conclude the May meeting feeling assured that we are almost there. Just one more phase to wrap up Swift Futuring when we reconvene for the academic year kick-off in August.

Act five: July - August 2024

Summary of goals for act five

- Goal 1: Create and present the final visionary prototype scenario.
- Goal 2: Inspire the team to participate in the next Swift Futuring experiment.

Re-enactment of my experience

July. We've reached the final step in this current experiment, synthesizing the six adapt scenarios into one.

While exercising significant leadership over the past 15-16 months to achieve my March 2023 goals (Figure 2), I have done my best to take a non-interventionist approach toward swift futuring. The team had creative license to generate our visionary prototype scenario, adapt.

But now I must bring us to the finish line. I will honor the co-created work while embracing my own standing as a fellow member of the organization and its current leader. What I present back to them in August will be theirs, mine, and hopefully ours.

August 20, 2024. Team meeting to kick off the new academic year. We are mostly in-person with a Zoom option. After reviewing the past year's organizational accomplishments, I turn our attention back to Swift Futuring. I display a slide to refresh us regarding where we have been and where we are now (Figure 9).

Swift Futuring Experiment



Fig. 9: The Swift Futuring experiment

Next I discuss the adapt-themed scenarios from May, and I propose a final product to encapsulate that co-created work and serve as a visionary prototype scenario, a north star, for our aspirational future. I propose that VCU Academic Affairs aspires to be a team that ADAPTS: Always developing, always progressing, transforming and sustaining (Figure 10). It is visionary because we can frame it as a collective goal, it is a scenario because we can make it central to the story we tell about ourselves and that others tell about us, and it is a prototype because it is compact and we can treat it as tentative while evaluating whether it works for us.

Proposed Goal: To be a team that **ADAPTS**

Always
Developing,
Always
Progressing,
Transforming, and
Sustaining



WE ARE THE **UNCOMMON.**

11

Fig. 10: ADAPTS: The proposed goal

Now I put on my leadership hat a little more squarely as I attempt to close this experiment and open us to a new one. First I connect ADAPTS to Conway's Law and ACE-ing the stakeholder experience, illustrating how having an ADAPTS culture supports service excellence and a stable and innovative academic enterprise.

Then I propose how we will continue building on ADAPTS in the new academic year with an effort called "ADAPTS: Caught in the Act!" The goal will be to foster a crowdsourced storytelling culture that documents how team members are displaying behaviors consistent with developing, progressing, transforming, and sustaining. I display a form with questions for collecting the stories (Table 2). It will be linked in our weekly internal newsletter and provided to other close stakeholders. ADAPTS stories can be submitted about anyone at any time.

We end the meeting with an announcement that strategic planning will be scheduled for October 2024 with an in-person retreat. I thank everyone for their partnership and wish them a successful semester in the meantime.

Here the curtain falls on the inaugural Swift Futuring experiment in five acts.

Table 2. Story collection questions for ADAPTS: Caught in the Act!

ADAPTS: Caught in the Act!	
1. Who is the team member you are highlighting?	
2. Which aspects of ADAPTS did this person display? Check all that apply.	
◇ Always developing (e.g., continuous learning, mentorship, prototyping)	
◇ Always progressing (e.g., goal achievement, problem solving)	
◇ Always transforming (e.g., leadership, impactful projects, catalyst)	
◇ Always sustaining (e.g., consistency, supportive behavior)	
3. What happened? Tell the story!	
4. Optional: How did seeing this person in action make you feel? Check all that apply or add others.	
◇ Hopeful	
◇ Motivated	
◇ Inspired	
◇ Safe	
◇ Supported	
◇ Proud	
◇ Other:	
5. Optional: Upload an email exchange or other piece of evidence.	
6. Optional: Your name and whether you'd like it to be shared publicly or stay anonymous.	

Translating Theory to Practice

This autoethnography explored two questions: How is a visionary prototype scenario developed in an organization? And, how did we change?

We observed that an organizational leader can serve as a Swift Futuring facilitator in lieu of an external consultant. Leader-facilitators run the risk of unduly influencing outcomes, but they can reduce the risk by intentionally allowing stakeholder-created visionary prototype scenarios to emerge. Moreover, a potential benefit of the leader-facilitator compared to an external consultant is the ability to improvise based on real-time conditions. Further studies should document the benefits and drawbacks of each facilitation approach.

Another observation is that the name Swift Futuring belies the time-intensive process of visionary prototype scenario development. Swift Futuring might take months, whereas a workshop to develop scenarios on a 50 year time horizon might last a weekend. That is because the visionary prototype scenario is a proxy for deep organizational climate and culture transformation. Swift Futuring is best suited for cases where an organization discerns that the moment (*kairos*) is right for devoting significant and sustained time (*chronos*) to the change process while experiencing significant existential pressures. Stakeholders should be prepared beforehand to experience Swift Futuring fatigue and encouraged throughout the process to remain focused on the goal.

A third observation is that Swift Futuring does appear to positively support organizational climate and culture change. A post hoc CLA (Inayatullah, 1998; Table 3) provides a framework for showing one dimension of change, to better understand how problems surfaced and translated into solutions for VCU Academic Affairs.

Several problems were apparent at the litany level, largely centered on problems with inefficiency, little collaboration, and compliance over innovation. The solution was improved processes and a more creative mindset.

Systemically, the surface problems were reinforced by senior leadership that did not consider how the status quo was negatively impacting internal and external stakeholder experiences. Solutions such as changes in leadership expectations and potentially in organizational structures would counteract the problems.

Table 3. Organization-level CLA

VCU Academic Affairs futures	
Litany	Workload pressures; reputation for compliance to the exclusion of innovation; inefficient and disjointed operations
Systemic causes	Siloed organization that has not encouraged let alone incentivized collaboration or expectations of positive stakeholder experiences
Discourse/worldview	Academic affairs is synonymous with compliance as its core function, and compliance does not mix with innovation
Myth/metaphor	By its very nature, U.S. higher education is steeped in bureaucracy, slow and out of touch with a rapidly changing world

At a worldview level, the idea that a compliance-focused organization like Academic Affairs could not be innovative was the problem. The solution was to recognize that compliance and innovation are two sides of the same coin, and that an academic affairs entity could become an exemplar of innovation.

The dominant myth was that U.S. higher education itself was a bureaucratic dragon, out of touch, and incapable of changing with the times. So the solution became the visionary prototype scenario ADAPTS – always developing, always progressing, transforming, and sustaining – as a model mindset and behavior pattern that would enable all stakeholders to reach an aspirational future for VCU Academic Affairs, the institution, and U.S. higher education at-large.

Conclusion

This autoethnography depicted the Swift Futuring process through the visionary prototype scenario development stage. A future study will be needed to examine how the visionary prototype scenario is implemented in an organization, and whether its implementation contributes to sustained change. In the words of Denzin and Lincoln (2011), “And so we come to the end, which is only the starting point for a new beginning, the contested future” (p. 681).

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