A Gathering of Futurists

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On April 5-6, 2002, the city of Seattle was the unwitting host to a small, modest gathering of futurists. The gathering was called the “Applied Futures Summit,” and was largely organized and driven by a small group of five younger(ish) futurists: Michele Bowman, Sandra Burchsted, Christian Crews, Andy Hines, and myself. This small organizing group was composed entirely of academically trained and actively professional futurists, arising out of the futures studies programs of the University of Hawaii at Manoa and the University of Houston at Clear Lake. That fact alone probably merits historical mention, as it signals that this fourth generation of futurists that now work around the globe are professionally trained, surely a turning point of some sort for futures. The attendees were, admittedly, a hand-picked, personally invited group of 21 individuals. Partly this reflected a desire to contain the gathering to a small, socially-manageable level, and partly it reflected a desire on the part of the organizers to gather with their immediate cohort and colleagues. I would have to say that the strategy worked very well to produce a worthwhile and intimate experience, and one that I wanted to take a moment to convey in a short, personal report on our experience.

The Summit was organized to bring together practicing futurists, mostly of the younger cohorts, to meet, socialize, share thoughts and experiences on methodologies and innovations, and generally discuss the future of the field. To quote from the materials that were disseminated: “The goal of the meeting is to promote innovation and networking among colleagues in the futures industry.” Specifically, the Summit had two main “tracks” that were used to loosely organize the two-day event, Professional Development and The Futures Marketplace. The two days were run on the principle of Open Space, and because of this, attendees proposed possible topics for different segments of the summit, and if people wanted to discuss a particular topic, they got together and discussed. Examples of pro-

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posed topics included Using the Rick Slaughter/Ken Wilber Four Foci Of Environmental Scanning and Defining the Futures “Message.” While the Summit was designed so that some form of output would be available afterward (and as of this writing that document is still in development), the focus was more on outcomes than output, and a very enjoyable “salon” atmosphere prevailed.

Why did we do it? As best as we can recollect, the idea for the Summit arose out of a confluence of at least two distinct discussions, covering a period of about four or five months. One such discussion came out of an alumni retreat for graduates of the futures program at the University of Houston at Clear Lake. That retreat, held in April of 2001, produced a discussion of a future, broader gathering, and that discussion continued up to the World Future Society conference in Minneapolis in July of 2001. It was from that conference that the second, unrelated discussion arose, partially it seems, because of my dissatisfaction with my experience at the 2001 WFS conference. The only real credit I could take is perhaps voicing a sentiment that many shared after the WFS conference, that it did not provide us, practicing, professionally-trained futurists, with the forum or sessions we really craved.

Now, I will avoid all discussion and debate over why that was because, frankly, it is beside the point. No one was blaming anyone else for this apparent lack of value; people just looking for something else. And to be fair, in almost every discussion over the perceived shortcomings of the WFS, the equally apparent shortcomings of the World Futures Studies Federation were discussed as well. Ultimately, the energy and desire to do something new, something that was ours, seemed to coalesce within our group without much effort. The time was right.

As for the content, we were very open-space, and wanted to touch on methodologies, professionalization, and innovation in the field. As I mentioned earlier, there will be a compilation of session results, which I believe will be available to anyone who desires a copy, so I won’t use this space to go into too many details. There were topics on methods (exploring the use of causal layered analysis, and innovations in scenario construction), topics on the how the American public perceives Futures (what should be the message, how do we communicate our message), and topics on the role of the Association of Professional Futurists.

I found some of the small discussions very relevant and personally helpful (e.g., why and how is what we do distinct from what others do? Why does it need or deserve it’s own title or moniker?) With other
discussions, I wondered why they were using up valuable meeting time for it. But just as I had things I wanted to talk about, so did others and space was made for a wide range of issues. The Summit was opened with the idea that people could vote with their feet, and in the end, if no one wanted to discuss a particular topic, that topic died a quiet, hopefully painless death. (In truth, individuals who proposed topics often attempted to retract them in the hopes of attending what they perceived to be a more interesting discussion)

One of the topics that I proposed, and one that was fortunate enough to get attended, was concerned with alternative methods of scenario construction. Attending such a rare gathering of my colleagues, I could not resist asking the assemblage about new and innovative methods for constructing scenarios, having read a recent Future Research Quarterly issue that dealt with the history and use of scenarios in futures. The topic seemed harmless enough, but I found others’ interest in the topic and the discussion that occurred strangely informative.

As most professionals probably have, I have spent a great deal of time pondering methods for constructing scenarios, alternative futures that clients can use to explore the future and expand their thinking. Like many, I had the opportunity to attend a couple of different training sessions produced by the Global Business Network, and am also familiar with variations on the theme. But I have always been somewhat disatisfied with the mechanical feel of many of these construction techniques. We start with a list of drivers, prioritize and organize them to construct scenarios, and then consider a host of implications. An oversimplification to be sure, but the basic process stands out. So I asked the group (initially just a couple of persons, but it grew to include all): How else can we construct exploratory scenarios?

There was genuine interest in the topic, and we discussed it for a decent amount of time, but in my opinion we failed to identify a new, strong approach to scenario construction. I was looking for an entirely new method, something fresh, something that didn’t follow the tired brainstorm-prioritize-organize-construct path. Surely, after decades of systems thinking and complexity, someone could have come up with something new? Something working on a genuinely new paradigm? Wasn’t there some new, and not flaky, way of perceiving the world and constructing its possibilities?

Apparently not.

Neither myself, nor anyone else, had anything genuinely new to offer. I found this to be an interesting statement about our field, at least as we
represented it in the room. Here was a group of very smart, experienced, and earnest individuals, and we hadn't been able to, or hadn't in the past tried to, come up with new methodologies for constructing alternative futures. How long have the existing methods been around? In fact, how much fundamental innovation is occurring in the field today? As I sat in the room that day it struck me that what I was experiencing was exactly what others in the field have already stated: there is a dearth of basic research in futures today, and the field may be suffering for it. Perhaps we are all spending so much time practicing, that we haven't spent enough time theorizing and researching. Sounds strange to say it, but there it is.

Another important experience at the Seattle Summit was a clearer observation of an undercurrent of tension that I have often felt in this “field” of futures. This tension that I perceive is between normative futures work and exploratory futures, between work that exposes deeper layers of change and meaning, and work that holds the empirical experience as the most valid. I would hazard the opinion that many of the attendees of our Seattle summit define “real,” “professional” futures work as that work that deals primarily with the exploratory, the surface, the exterior-social and technology-driven worlds we see when we first open our eyes. They may not publicly discount work that’s normative or dealing with deeper trends and meaning, but I personally suspect that they find it of less value, ultimately, in getting a client to honor the invoice. Now, I most certainly do not want anyone to think that I'm devaluing anyone’s very real concerns with making a real living working with real clients (who, after all, are as human and fallible as we are). Not at all. Like most everyone else, I want to actually get paid to do this futures thing with others. But there did seem to be an unspoken sentiment that the methods and work that is valuable with clients is that work that dwells largely in the “pop futurism” quadrant of Rick Slaughter's environmental scanning framework.

Now, I can't say if this is true or not. I can only speak to what I perceived at our Summit. And this is certainly not to imply that anyone who was there does not have a genuine interest in using futures thinking with clients, who ever they might be. But I think part of the reason why I perceived this sentiment floating among the attendees had partially to do with the topics and issues that got significant “airtime” in formal and informal discussions. While I personally looked forward to swapping methods and discussing innovations and experiences, many attendees seemed to want to discuss the “message” of futures studies, that is, the public perception of futures studies, and who the public associates with futures.
There was a considerable amount of discussion around how futures is portrayed and how to craft and communicate a new message for the public. At some point during the Summit, it occurred to me that perhaps these discussions were driven as much by a desire to strengthen the coherence of the field as to properly direct the paying public to a specific cadre of consultants.

Of course, these were simply musings, unsubstantiated by any specific comment or suggestion. But a real part of the reason for holding this summit was the idea of distinguishing between “applied” futures and “professional” futurists, and other groups that practice, or attempt to practice, in this field of futures (recall that this was the Applied Futures Summit). I support the idea that there can and should be professionalization of this field, and that there is real room to distinguish between sincere and rigorous futures work and work that only pays lip service to critical futures thinking. But a concern raised at our Summit is that it was not representative of the world’s people and worldviews, not by half. So, a largely white, male, North American group was defining what “applied” futures is, and who “professional” futurists are. This was an issue, I think, for our Summit. And yet, it provides an opportunity for us to stop and ask. What is Applied Futures? Can we distinguish it from other work? Who should be considered “futurists”? And, should futures be defined as a field, in the western academic tradition, or is it really more an approach to work and life, a philosophy, if you will.

Too bad I don’t have the answers.

Happily, these questions and discussions arising out of the Seattle Summit continued after the summit itself concluded. Shortly after the Seattle trip, I posted some thoughts and reactions I had to a small email list of friends and colleagues, and the response was energetic and stimulating. For a period of about two or three weeks, my initial perception of a “tension” between surface-level and deeper futures prompted a number of persons to debate what they perceived to be tensions in the field, which in cases differed from my own perception but were certainly valid and illuminating points of view. Some members of this small email group felt that the tension centers around client-centered vs. consultant-centered futurists, where a client-centered futurist works objectively with the client’s own values and a consultant-centered futurist is “normative” and promotes their own values within the client’s work. Some saw the tension as an issue of insiders vs. outsiders, where the insiders are those privileged by dominant world-views and the outsiders are marginalized by those dominant structures. Others felt that the tension is really about
standards, about the need to distinguish the qualified futurists from any old joe who decides to call themselves a futurist. The very engaging email threads we had going wove through discussions of things like the definition of “normative” futures and the nature and distinction of a futurist’s work, that is, what’s the unique value added? I don’t know that we came to any new earth-shattering conclusion, but the discussion, agreements, and disagreements were extremely worthwhile and helped, I believe, to clarify for everyone involved the professional issues and different perspectives in our field. It was a nice offshoot of the Seattle Summit, as it continued the conversations, began to broaden the participation (about half the email group was unable to attend Seattle), and transferred some of the energy and enthusiasm of the Summit to others in the field.

Despite the lingering questions (or perhaps because of them), I am quite pleased with what we accomplished. A gathering of colleagues, a chance for deep thought, and exposure to other perspectives. While this particular gathering could never be replicated, I sincerely hope that there are future gatherings of equal or greater success, in which a much broader group of futurists can participate. Truly, this summit was meant only as a beginning, borne largely out of friendship, and was never meant to be more than it was.