

# Market Wants, World Needs

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## Abstract

*These reflections present a personal perspective on the Tamkang international conference, part of Tamkang University's ongoing commitment to encouraging debate between futurists and institutions, locally and globally. My paper appeared in the previous issue of this journal (Kelly, 2002). Briefly, I am following an "infiltrating a futures element" approach (Hicks, 2002) in work with first year engineering students who are an extraordinarily culturally and socially diverse global microcosm, in a mainstream discipline many regard as difficult to change. My curriculum choices are also "ways of promoting the social learning that will be necessary to navigate the transition to sustainability" (Raskin et al., 2002). Here, I am focussing only on questions and issues that arose for me during the conference. Some of my responses relate to the proposed Global Masters program in Futures Studies while others are more general suggestions relating to conferences and colloquia.*

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## Fundamental Questions

1. *How do we accommodate the apparent demands of market-driven education systems without losing the value base and radical nature of futures thinking in the process?*

We have all had to compromise in order to incorporate futures thinking into our work and our working lives. However, tension exists because the language of alternative futures is necessarily out of step with increasingly utilitarian and market driven forms of education (Hicks, op.cit. p.43) and therefore attracts less support. How do we devise education programs that give students skills and attitudes "demanded" by employers at the same time as preparing them to work for what a sustainable planet needs? Much of what is unsustainable in our world has been produced by market driven discourse. So whose version/vision of a changing world is driving the skills and literacies we seek to develop? How much market-driven language can we accept before we lose the discourse of challenge we began with? Who will change whom? Gatherings like this provide opportunities to discuss these tensions and resolve them if possible.

Critical Futures Studies can contribute to a concept of citizenship based on "connection and responsibility for self, for others, for

changing what we do not like about our world" (Heath, 2000, p.45). Integrating values-based critical futures thinking into mainstream discipline areas is one way of influencing large numbers of graduates. We can be addressing the legitimate needs of the workplace through students' advanced communication skills at interpersonal and intercultural levels as well as through their creativity and ability to think outside the box. Of Inayatullah's five pillars of FS, three—Macrohistory, Anticipation, Alternatives—scenario and social design could also be conscripted to serve any market need. The fourth and fifth, Ways of Knowing and Transformative knowledge, are the radical and challenging areas of Futures Studies that cannot be coopted or compromised (Inayatullah, 2002, pp.150-151).

Similarly, most of the ways Inayatullah uses the future could exist in a market—serving dimension. What makes them futures—oriented is the motivation or intention behind them and whether the teaching processes also match the intention. The last of the ways, Microvita or the energy dimension, has no market appeal. The market's representatives would not recognise a healing dimension of learning, since they do not think that they or their paradigm are sick. So one part of the answer to my question is, if it does not transform, it is no longer Futures Studies. In the light of these comments, a second and related question arose:

2. *How do we ensure that any Global Masters (GM) in Futures Studies is not old wine in new bottles?*

The Global Masters program discussion was held when David Hicks and I were doing the workshop. I support developing such a program as an effective way of extending and supporting futures studies and building on scarce human and material resources. Here are some of the issues I would have liked to raise, based on my experience teaching and studying in distance, online mode. Some of these were stimulated by Chen and Chen's strategies for and concerns about distance teaching (2002, p.207).

*We can not expect from students what we do not model ourselves.*

In online work, the role of a teacher is more that of a guide and mentor (Phipps, 1998). In negotiating professional standards, will the GM include the professional development of those involved in teaching online and across cultures, whatever their academic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds? When students enter "territorially unknown waters," they suffer from feelings of "uncertainty, hesitancy and diffidence" (Goh, 1994, p.279). The course must have "a human face." What may seem a brief comment to one person, can appear as a devastating criticism to another. Without pre-emptive action and awareness on the part of the mentor/guide, small things can lead to "irritation, annoyance, misunderstanding and frustration" (ibid) or worse. This is when students withdraw into silence or from a course altogether. Agreement on course expectations and attitudes (online or in person) is critical to creating a safe learning environment for teachers and students. What do students expect? What do teachers expect? How do we establish this? How do students cope with the unexpected? How do they negotiate uncertainties, barriers? What is the online teacher's guarantee to students?

Language is a critical and related issue. Studying difficult concepts in a second or other language can be made easier. How will language support be built into courses, especially online, for those who need it? Will courses be written in plain language, designed for reader understanding? The Plain English movement puts the responsibility on the writer, not the reader, to make a topic accessible.

**Alternative futures for conferences and colloquia**

The following suggestions are based on learnings from my best and worst experiences of conferences in many countries.

1. *Begin all conferences or workshops, large or small,*

*with opportunities for getting to know others. This work can incorporate conference aims and themes.*

It is important to have time and activities designed to help people get to know each other as *part of* the conference timetable, rather than add-on social extras. Even in this small group, I did not know all the visiting professors, except by name in many cases. We were fortunate that this was a small group and the hosts warm and welcoming. I suspect that such activities are not usually built into conferences because of "hurry sickness" (Gleick). One symptom is a powerful and dispiriting discourse that denigrates such activities as "childish," or a "waste of time" that could be spent on safe, depersonalised "content". Such discourse is integral to market driven education, (does it appeal?) but antithetical to reflection (what future does it serve?). Behind this resistance is fear of activities that really address intersecting issues of power, gender and culture relations.

2. *Inclusive issues*

The Tamkang colloquium had a more comfortable ratio of females to males, if you include the postgraduate students, than many futures conferences. Perhaps as a result of this, it had a more 'partnership' than 'dominator' feel to it. These terms "describe systems of belief and social structures that either nurture and support—or inhibit and undermine—equitable, democratic, non-violent, and caring relations" (Eisler, 2001). No one hesitated to address matters of the emotions or the spirit. Genuinely interactive gatherings will also meet the "need for someone from a different culture to question our motives, repudiate our assumptions and to search our conscience" (Passfield, 1996, p.23). In the sense that English was the working language, all native English speakers were advantaged; however, the bi- and trilingual hosts and guests illustrated the point that all futurists should know another language and culture intimately (Dator, 2002, p.30; Taylor, 1994). Learning another language involves understanding the effort this involves and shaking and stirring cultural assumptions; (Dian, 2002, p.31; Teng & Chang, 2002).

3. *Working with groups*

Beginning with group work creates an active space for participants to meet as equals; to establish common ground and challenge possible assumptions as well as to identify issues of difference. David Hicks and I faced a group work challenge when asked at short notice to organise a workshop with a mixed audience of undergraduates, post-graduates and teachers from within and outside the university. The setting was a large hall with the audience sitting behind tables. David and I "modelled" an interview with each other, asking three questions:

*How did you become interested in futures studies?*

*What do you do?*

*What do you hope to learn from today's session?*

We began with an interview because we wanted the audience to do the same, each *person* pairing with someone they "*didn't know yet*," to ask each other these same questions. They then had to join with two other pairs and share one thing they had learned from this activity. Realising that we were serious about this and with their teachers encouraging them, the noise rose to gratifying levels as the neat rows broke up into active groups. This culminated in a feedback session where group spokespersons were invited to "*share their thoughts with us so we can learn*." One brave student began with an excellent summary in English. It became more rewarding when presenters, with encouragement and help from their teachers, switched between Chinese and English. The comments and ensuing discussions were lively and engaging. One group spontaneously presented a small environmental drama that drew enthusiastic applause. David introduced Elise Boulding's concept of the two hundred year present with a simple and powerful example of a grandmother's ring worn by a little girl. Her child in turn might wear that ring and in that simple way, she was connected to generations before and after her time. This powerful metaphor crossed cultures immediately.

I could see as I mixed with the groups and watched their interactions, that, (as with the students I teach at QUT) there were some students who did not want to leave their comfort zones. For the vast majority though, it seemed to be the same liberating and empowering experience that it is for students and staff I have worked with in Australia and elsewhere. The workshop responses revealed the deep concerns these students and teachers had about their society and the world, but there was no time to pursue these in depth.

#### *4. Make time to discuss papers and presentations in small groups with colleagues and students*

Most conferences are still designed on the Sage—on—the—Stage model. This makes it more difficult for many young people and females to speak up. It also means that most of the time is taken up with presentations rather than discussions about their significance. After the conference, a few of us attended one of Sohail Inayatullah's graduate classes. The students, all female, did a wonderful job of explaining their chosen macrohistorian's ideas and how they were useful. Two thoughts struck me. Wearing my hat as a teacher of English as a Second Language, I thought it would be useful to have a separate session devoted to the English of the topic under discussion and the language of critical discussion, which they would then feel more confident to use in tuto-

rials. Wearing a semiotician's hat, I saw that, as in most other universities, there were no images of sustainable alternative futures on the walls. I had already noted that advertisements on Taiwanese television, as on Australian television, use their large budgets to urge young people to see themselves as uncritical inheritors of fast food and fast car futures, futures dependent on disconnecting from their home cultures and the Earth. On my wall, a poster called Spirit of Life, with two Bottlenose dolphins leaping joyfully out of a clear sea, reminds me that I share the planet with a diminishing number of other species on whom I impact. We need such images around us to remind us that all of our cultures are responsible for changing things that we do, if all other species and future generations are to inherit a planet worth living on or even if the planet is to have any other species and future generations.

"There is no place today where we can escape to, no sanctuary of the soul, no island hide-out, no inner or outer refuge that can prevent us experiencing the plight of the world and all its people (Pybus & Flanagan, 1990, p.k213).

#### Conclusion

For alternative ways of knowing to be built into any course design, they must first exist in the minds and hearts of the course designers. "There is a difference between geographic thinking and the thinking of the heart" (Grant, 2000, p.19). Some students at the colloquium responded with interest to the concept of "unlearning". This includes moving past the litany or surface levels of dialogue to facing our respective areas of cultural contest and change. For example, the roles, contributions and treatment of Indigenous people are issues common to many countries, including Australia and Taiwan, but they did not feature in our conversations about alternative futures at Tamkang. I am interested in what students and teachers of Futures Studies at Tamkang and elsewhere find the most challenging. How do you use what you learn, to uncover and challenge taken for granted knowings? What have you had to "unlearn"?

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