

Futures Learning Strategies for Social Transformation and Lifelong Learning

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Abstract: This paper explores futures learning strategies enacted by ecosystem building futurists working with organizations and communities for social transformation and adaptation to uncertain futures. The research is based on interviews with futurists who work as ecosystem builders to understand the *what*, *how*, and *why* of their work. In so doing, the *where* of their passions is unveiled, especially as it relates to personal transformation and lifelong learning that includes openness to new and diverse ideas, interdisciplinary learning, and active exploration of and connections with systems relationships, chaos and complexity. Results of this research point to the importance of and need for futures learning strategies for all as we shift individualized goals to socially significant, ecosystem building visions to thrive in post-normal, post-pandemic times.

Keywords: futures learning, lifelong learning, social transformation, ecosystem builders, futurists

Futures studies explore how individuals and groups of individuals come together to engage and enact plausible, possible, probable and emergent futures and the role futurists can play in helping them recognize underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions about their relationship with the future to create the kinds of futures they want. Research by futurist Jim Dator (2020) suggests four archetypical relationships we have with the future with orientations and expectations for growth, collapse/decay, obedience, and transformation. In post-pandemic, post-normal times (Sardar, 2010), adult educators have a role to play in supporting society's needs to define and enact the kinds of futures we need to create more fair, just, and sustainable societies. We have a lot to learn from futures strategies and thinking. As researchers, we were interested in exploring how a unique group of ecosystem-building futurists described their approaches to futures work to inform our considerations of adult educators' potential challenges, opportunities, and strategies.

Research Procedures

At the risk of oversimplification, the futures field consists of pragmatic, client-oriented futurists, academic-theoretical futurists, and community activist, ecosystem building futurists. While the futures field has a long history (Gidley, 2017), since World War II, futurists have focused their work on humanistic, democratic approaches to futures studies (Gidley, 2020). Within that, only a small and emerging group of futurists consider themselves ecosystem building futurists (Bennett, 2019). Ecosystem building futurists work collaboratively in community settings to increase new social ecosystems. Recently, thirty-five ecosystem building futurists participated in a two-day gathering to explore communities of the future (Smyre & Richardson, 2016) strategies and collaborations. Most of the participants at this convening also participate with the Kauffmann Foundation ecosystem building initiative (Hwang, 2020). Fifteen of the attendees agreed to be interviewed for this study. The 15 participants in this study ranged in age from mid-30's to 70's.

Their job descriptions included: city manager, futures consultant (2), CEO of a futures organization or network (2), community activator (3), co-starter entrepreneur, development fundraiser (2), global network organizer (2), and organizational/strategic management firm principal (2).

Participants were individually interviewed via Zoom. Interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. An open-ended semi-structured question protocol asked them to define futurist and describe their personal development as a futurist, their approaches to lifelong learning, innovation, creativity and visions, a personal transformational experience, and their commitment to community transformation. Grounded theory (Creswell & Poth, 2016) was used to guide an analysis of their futures orientations to address *what, how, why, and where* questions about their futures work as ecosystem builders. Grounded theory is especially valuable for exploring evolving themes and relationships in complex and emerging fields. Since there was no existing research, we could find on ecosystem building futurists as a special group of futurists, grounded theory provided opportunities for categorical convergences through our inductive explorations and provided perspective of their overall understandings of ecosystem building.

Findings and Discussion

What do Ecosystem Building Futurists Do?

We identified four major categories that distinguished their work. While three of the categories are typical of most futurists who work with clients in business, organizational, political or social settings, it was the fourth category that distinguished this group as ecosystem builder futurists. As they defined themselves and their work, they discussed (a) making connections to help solve complex problems about unforeseen realities, (b) identifying “weak signals” and emerging trends to prepare for and create the future, and (c) tapping into the potential for foresight, creativity and adaptive responses to uncertainty. Several of the participants worked in traditional settings and described their approach as ecosystem building futurists as something above and beyond their traditional work as a futurist.

The fourth category describing their work as ecosystem builders was (d) working for organizational and community transformation. Notably, those who worked in community entrepreneurial ecosystem building projects or social activism conveyed a deeper, more connected approach to social and ecological framing of their work as transforming society to create new orders, relationships, systems, models, or understandings. They were driven by a vision of social transformation to address many deeply seeded social challenges. The goal of social transformation focuses ecosystem building futurists’ work in what Miller (2011, 2017) and Cowart (2020) describe as emergentist futures and presencing. Their focus on creating and shaping potential futures rather than preparing for “a future” oriented their work as ecosystem building futurists to bring about new possibilities and unforeseen futures at a social level.

The Why of Ecosystem Building Futures

To explore the underlying reasons this group of futurists engaged in ecosystem building futures

work, we examined the metaphors they used in describing and making sense of their work to explore underlying values and worldviews. The metaphors participants used to describe their work came from complex adaptive systems, biological systems theories, dynamical and chaotic systems theory, environmental ecosystems, and electro-magnetism. Their metaphors emphasized relationships, ecosystems such as rainforests, and emergence as key unique goals of their work. Descriptions of these metaphors included underlying values for relationship, interconnectivity, interdependence, process over product, sustainability, care, trust, and compassion. Over-arching strategies and perspectives that supported these values included the importance of *seeding* the conversation rather than dictating it, creating safe environments for open and diverse conversation and storytelling, supporting holistic thinking to include all STEEP (social, technological, economic, environmental, and policy) dimensions of social impact, and helping their clients or the communities in which they worked strive for coherence across social systems. They emphasized emergence, newness, and creation as important outcomes of their work. And in several cases, the participants saw their role as a disruptor to create the right amount of tension to push the system forward. As they expanded their descriptions to describe their “domain of work” (Bishop & Hines, 2012) as community and social transformation, their language revealed what Slaughter (2020) describes as an integral futures (IF) perspective with a focus on ecological holism and interconnectedness.

The Where of Ecosystem Builders’ Futurist Passions

From an IF perspective (Slaughter, 2020), the where of futures work explores the depth of commitment, vision, and underlying myths and metaphors for work as a futurist. Ideas about where their ecosystem building passions came from were addressed through questions about their approaches to lifelong learning, their family relationships and education, and the metaphors they used that revealed and explained their underlying values for ecosystem building.

As described above, many of the metaphors and language the ecosystem building futurists used reflected back to aspects of the new sciences (Capra, 1982; Gleick, 1987; Waldrop, 1992) of systems, chaos and complexity with interconnectedness, uncertainty, nonlinear impacts and emergence as key characteristics. Their passion came from recognizing traditional ways of approaching business or social change were steeped in mechanical paradigms that did not accommodate these dynamic relationships and potential for emergence. Their passion was to bring these more organic approaches to their work in creating new social structures and dynamics.

When asked about their approaches to lifelong learning, all described what Clardy (2000) defines as *scanning* approaches to self-directed learning as they continuously sought out new learning and individuals with backgrounds and experiences different from them. They exhibited what Caffarella (2000) describes as emancipatory goals supporting social justice and social transformation. Several included metaphors of the heart and soul to describe their work, emphasizing their passions to learn and create as holistic and integrated (Dirkx, 2012). Family impact was described as supportive and encouraging of their “eclectic” approach to learning and sensemaking. As one person reflected, “I’ve always been a unicorn!”

The How of Ecosystem Futuring

When asked to describe their approaches to ecosystem building, all participants referred in some way to going beyond “strategic planning” to include STEEP (Social, Technological, Economical, Environmental, and Policy) perspectives. They described extending traditional futures approaches (Bishop & Hines, 2012) such as backcasting, economic projections, DELPHI, forecasting, and trend analyses to elicit deeper metaphors and values orientations (Inayatullah, 2008). They used both/and approaches to meet the needs of their clients for traditional forecasting information and to push their clients and communities in which they worked forward to explore underlying values and clarify goal assumptions and needs. They used Master Capacity Building strategies (Smyre & Richardson, 2016) to listen to and shape conversations and decolonize futures (Bisht, 2020). They helped their clients explore weak signals and wild cards (Hiltunen, 2020) and become comfortable with uncertainty. They didn’t dictate outcomes and were especially attentive to building and sustaining trust. Their *how*’s of ecosystem building placed their work in the field of aspirational futures (Bezold, 2020).

Conclusions

As Miller (2017) described, emergentist approaches to futures work are guided by “futures unimagined and hence a present that does not yet make sense” (p. 25). The ecosystem building futurists in this study were especially driven to create and impact communities for social transformation. In adult education terms, they understood what Freire (2000) described as the ontological conditions of the future as emergent, unfinished, and uncertain (Fleener & Prefonatiné, in press) and were driven by an ethic of the heart-work of futuring (Coward, 2020) that “creates the futures we desire” (Inayatullah, 2008, p. 6). Uncovering the “futures in the present” to “discover and invent and construct the world around us” (Miller, 2011, p. 23) for “revealing and managing uncertainties ... [and] remov(ing) the illusion of certainty or determinism” (Bishop & Hines, 2012, pp. 216-217) were goals that were supported through processes and approaches to their futures work that engaged them and their audiences in an approach to learning that included searching for new meanings (Clardy, 2000) and lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2004).

Aligned with adult education, the ecosystem builder futurists in this study were committed to developing capacities within the communities they served as a social learning system. They thus took on roles of educator versus conveyor, facilitator versus sage, vision producing versus visionary, listener versus speaker, coordinator versus manipulator, and dance partner versus dance instructor. Importantly, they viewed their work as *heart* work and as a change catalyst rather than change agent. As ecosystem builder futurists, they strived for collaboration versus competition, and connectedness rather than individual advancement for either themselves or their clients.

As we explored the work they did, the alignment of the skills, practices, and underlying ethics and metaphors they used provided a model for adult learning for social transformation became increasingly obvious. As we considered their reported impacts in communities and social settings, we have come to recognize the value in and need for an approach to futures studies that instills in all citizens an approach to futures learning to embrace, create and transform society in

holistic, meaningful and caring ways. As David Rock (2020), Forbes contributor, espoused: *The key is to think like a futurist*. We conclude with our own advocacy for an ecosystem, futures-building, Futures Adult Learning for All (FALA).

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