

From vision into action

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Abstract

Utopian thinking, problematic as it can be, is used for imagining alternative visions of the future as a design process. Visioning adds foresight to an active-learning process in which participants share critical reflection, decision and change, as *Anticipatory Action Learning*. Guidelines, including ethics, are suggested. Once its limitations are recognised, it can be used for integrating learning in a social system. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

After reviewing utopian thinking in Western literature, John Carey [5] concluded that *utopia* is where we store our hopes of happiness. But this commonly held notion of utopia as a good place is probably not what Thomas More had in mind when he coined the word. It simply means *nowhere* or *no-place*, devoid of either optimism or pessimism. Whether conveying either desires or fears, Carey sees a dilemma. In seeking to create a new world, utopian projects must destroy the old.

Henry Giroux (109–140) [3] acknowledges the difference in meaning and points to the contradictory legacy of utopian idealism. It was denounced in the latter half of the 20th century by socially progressive thinkers for its reliance on grand social schemes that bred fascism and the Holocaust. For certain conservatives it legitimised the violent blood baths of Stalin, Pol Pot and Mao. He shows how this contradictory legacy has re-emerged more recently to be scorned by progressives and utterly distrusted by cultural conservatives. Utopianism has become the rallying cry for the neoliberals' free-market capitalism.

Giroux, a cultural critic, insists that utopian thinking do more than appeal to lofty social visions. It must be the basis for reclaiming and redefining the value of political agency and struggle, since democracy has been corrupted by the market and by rampant individualism. Thus social change demands critical thinking and learning in the classroom and the public sphere to be effective in civic education, public policy and cultural politics. He advocates a move from utopianism to the politics of 'educated hope'.

Utopian thinking can become hollow whether destructive or creative. It can disappoint if one's desires are not attained. And if attained, particularly if new desires emerge along the way,

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it can leave a feeling of *so-what?* Also, utopianism can imply false, even pathological, optimism as we see in the wishfulness of much of the *new-age* self-help genre.

1. Visioning

In reviewing futures studies, Italian futurist, Eleonora Masini [6], identifies the use of utopias as one way in which the field tries to understand the changing interrelations between humanity, society and the environment. She calls this the *visions approach*. Jim Dator [2] prefers the word *eutopia* where *eu* is Greek for good. Thus, *eutopia* is a preferred future: “The best possible real world you can imagine and strive for, always re-evaluating your preferences as you struggle towards it”.

To Dutch sociologist and macrohistorian, Fred Polak [10], who significantly influenced Masini, a study of the rise and fall of cultures reveals an impressive role for an image of the future. So long as a society’s image is positive and flourishing, he said, the flower of culture is in full bloom. Once the image begins to decay and lose its vitality the culture does not survive for long. To him, a prime project of civilisation is to create a positive, transformational image of the future.

Masini suggests that we may aspire to change by creating a vision of the future. She recalls Polak [11]: the future not only must be perceived but it must be shaped. Johan Galtung is well known for asserting that holding a compelling vision of the future is a powerful means for change.

2. Vision for change

Moving from vision to action is a feature of Anticipatory Action Learning (AAL) [12], a foresight process that will be discussed here. It addresses the semantic and other difficulties in the concept of utopia. AAL goes well beyond visioning, and consciousness-raising, alone. It integrates critique reflection into a decision-action process of foresight. It offers a nonviolent and non-confrontational way to change to a preferred future.

The power of ideas (thinking) and how they relate with action (practice) has long been the focus of intelligent discourse. Marx famously asserted that philosophy has only interpreted the world when the point is to change it. Certain academics would disagree.

Yet the power of ideas cannot be denied. Ideas may have played a bigger role in social change than technology. The question is: if, undoubtedly, ideas are necessary for change, are they sufficient? Does a change in thinking guarantee a change in action? Numerous studies have shown that thinking and education, alone, often have little effect on behaviour [7].

Until we come to understand the complex relationship between thought and action more clearly, it seems to make sense that we turn to *praxis*, integrating thought and practice—ideas into action.

3. Alternative futures

We can reasonably conclude there is a role for visions, or eutopias, as sets of ideas, in creating social change. And if a preferred vision seeks a future unfettered from the limitations of the status quo, critical thinking is necessary in formulating that vision, whether Wendell Bell’s [1] (objective) *critical realism* or the more subjective, often politicised, cultural criticism. Without critical thought we could easily be offered a poor choice between a simplistic high-tech,

free-market future and just as simplistic a wish list for a sparkling clean, green world. Alternatives, not necessarily only two, need to account for nuances and to allow for creating futures that challenge the dominant perspective of the past and present.

Whether in scenario planning alone, or in foresight processes such as AAL, alternative futures can be constructed to meet varying assumptions and aspirations. At any given time there is a range of alternative futures that may lie ahead. They could be possible, plausible, probable, desirable or undesirable futures or some combination.

Plural futures allow a choice of future destinations in order to come back, *backcast*, from that chosen vision and to develop an action plan and pathway for realising it. This differs from traditional strategic planning which relies mainly on forecasting from a known past or present, and from their trend lines. Backcasting from the vision of a car-free city can have very different effects from extrapolating the traffic needs of a city in order to calculate how many new freeways and parking stations are needed to meet the trends.

4. What is AAL?

But who has the right and the competence to construct and select a preferred vision on behalf of any social unit and to work backwards towards enacting the journey into the future? No doubt, that depends on the worldview, management style, ideology, politics and context of the social unit using AAL.

If a democratic process is to proceed, then of course as many as possible people in and around that social unit, as users of the consequences, and a wide variety of interests, should take part in the inquiry and the decisions. For example, in formulating a community strategy for the sustainable management of a water catchment, not only farmers and urban residents should be included, but the influential people in nearby regions and in the remote seats of government. These should include specialists who can explain the consequences of decisions, for instance, whether or not to revegetate river banks, or to build new dams. Participants need to be asked what expertise they need and how to bring the necessary decision data into the process. Is this not in the spirit of Giroux's [4] politics of educated hope?

AAL is based on the experiential social-design process described by Morgan and Ramirez [9]. They use collaborative action learning for inquiry and decision-action. Knowledge is generated not just to explain and understand, but also to enable action. Negative feedback allows steering back to the path towards a desired future. Positive feedback (or *feed-forward*) explores for options. Following Morgan and Ramirez, a minimal set of initial conditions promotes individual *and* collective self-organisation. As a democratic process, AAL is facilitated to ensure critical reflection on the results of inquiry from many perspectives. It integrates the relations between changes in knowledge and behaviour, always questioning the underlying values.

Updating an earlier description [13], the guidelines for AAL include:

- Identify the people who will take part in the foresight learning process, hopefully as many as possible of the social unit of inquiry, allowing diverse perspectives, and *ideally* including people with authority to make change in that unit.
- During the process, define the scope of the anticipation, particularly in terms the time horizon (preferably 20–100 years) and of social space: what is to be explored long-term and how?
- Agree on what data need to be identified and collected for analysis, who will gather them and how; and how they will be treated in the process.

- Analyse the data collected from outside and otherwise brought forward by participants, including trends and emerging issues.
- Critically review the findings for the underlying values and reflect on the consequences, including effects on future generations.
- Create a range of alternative futures, scenarios or visions.
- Critically analyse the implications of each future, including the ethical, economic, ecological, civilisational, gender and community consequences.
- Choose a preferred future or vision.
- Develop action plans and pathways to attain the preferred future.
- Particularly review the detail for immediate actions, including tomorrow's actions.
- Agree on a review timetable.
- Engage with the players who can help or hinder enactment of the chosen future.
- Reiterate the process, including visioning, as agreed.

This is unlike traditional strategic planning which is often restricted to a single executive or an internal team in an organisation, having the effect of separating the users of the decision-process from the expertise. Strategic planning is a problem-solving and goal-seeking process. AAL is *goal-creating*, where goals are selected and created during the process and not preordained by an external authority. Its democratic ethos allows a shared assessment of the values assaulted in leaving behind, of even destroying, the old in order to create the new.

5. Limitations of AAL

As a contrived process, it is not surprising there are limitations with AAL, particularly when it happens in a social system with conventional mindsets founded in hierarchical control and competitiveness. By contrast, community organisations are freer of central control. But community organisations rely on volunteers who do not always persist with the process over many days or weeks, unlike in a school or hospital where participants are held captive to the process.

It has worked reasonably well in my local region for developing a catchment-management strategy for the Mary River Valley in Queensland, Australia, and for applying visioning experiments in community governance in nearby Noosa Shire. The limitations discussed below are largely derived from these two examples.

It has worked well in imaginatively led units within a business or government organisation. But it is less practical at the larger scale of policy making for a big corporation or a nation, except within the corporate strategy teams themselves. In such cases, relatively few constituents are able to take part.

The process can be time-consuming compared with leaving the decisions to people at the top. Participants can become impatient with the time needed—often several weeks—to gather facts, analyse them and reflect on them, before making a decision. In a can-do world some people just want to get it over with, quickly. Others, more apathetic, want to leave it to others. Yet, continuing active participation by all is necessary for it to work well and fairly.

The most willing participants in community organisations are volunteers, people happy to skip the daily grind to join an interesting process. Or they are people committed to change. Even then, citizens have competing distractions in their lives. Many have to make money or cook to feed the household. Well meaning people get locked in a catch-22. They feel it a duty to take part. But they have to make time for their own lives.

Some citizens believe only the elected representatives are legitimised to make decisions for a community, rather than citizen volunteers who often self-select for these processes. Then there are always the people who want to be legalistic rather than collaborative.

In community consultation many who take part can be retired, wealthy white men and women, biasing the process for socio-economic class. Representatives from industry sectors are invited, too, most likely bringing a male bias. And private participants can feel pressured from the social power given to industry. Industry representatives can have conflicting interests. Do they represent their role as family providers, or as industry powerbrokers?

Small property owners tend to be overlooked. Yet small landholders can have a significant effect, for instance, on land-resource management. And key stakeholders outside the social unit can easily be overlooked. For example, in planning for a new town to the west of Sydney back in the 1970s, the big-city real estate agents were not consulted. Yet they proved to have the most influence on future land prices in the regional study area.

Even after effective representation, the actions decided are subject to higher politics of the authorities who may choose whether to enact, or even to listen to matters that fall outside their corporate agenda. The people with the power to make decisions, sign cheques and implement the results of the process, are usually too busy, or too self-important, to be participants in such a process, or at least in the whole of it. And the power elite is still largely male machismo. All this is frustrating for participants who have been given the expectation that their deliberations will count.

There are also limitations to futures thinking. A false optimism, sometimes pathological, can dominate, as we can see in wishful, *new-age* thinking.

Most commonly *groupthink* sets in. When thinking converges on the conventional wisdom, few, if any, new criteria or opportunities emerge. Visions tend to be constructed from entrenched assumptions about past and present, rather than the future—what might be. Too often, conventional wisdom frowns on dissent and wildcard thinking.

6. Overcoming AAL's limitations

These limitations demand experienced skilful facilitation where the facilitator is the catalyst of a fair and democratic process, remaining personally inert to judgement. The facilitator needs process-management skills for building trusting relationships that will generate mutual benefit, not zero-sum results. And the vision needs to be continually revisited and reviewed.

As witnessed from the common pitfalls in social planning, care is needed for:

- activating the passives to defuse the pressures from those who are most active and vocal, thus giving the less articulate an opportunity for reflection and decision making; and
- balancing the right of citizenship choice with technical competence, to ensure informed decisions.

It has been said that expertise needs to be on tap, not on top.

Times and venues need special attention so people caught up in busy lives can play their part in democratic choice and action. And the process must not degenerate into political competition which makes it even more time consuming while obstructing genuine learning.

Care is needed to facilitate around the pitfalls of visioning:

- encouragement of alternative, even wildcard thinking, to avoid groupthink;
- bringing realism and plausibility to the visions without stifling alternative and creative thinking; and
- continuing reviews of the visioning.

AAL avails itself to some or all of the places (and ways) for intervening in a social system identified by Donna Meadows [8]. They are, in ascending order of importance: numbers (subsidies, taxes, standards); material stocks and flows; regulating of negative feedback loops; driving positive feedback loops; information flows; rules of the system (incentives, punishment, constraints); the power of self-organisation; goals of the system; mindset or paradigm out of which the goals, rules and feedback structure arise.

Then, when a stubborn surfeit of reason, serving selfish ends, begins to mask the human spirit, we may need ways of accessing the numinous.

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