Integral Futures: Breadth Plus Depth Equals Foresight with Insight

*"Integral Futures: Breadth Plus Depth Equals Foresight with Insight," Review of Volume 1 of the AFI Monograph Series, On the Horizon, 12(3), 2004.*

Abstract: The Australian Foresight Institute has brought a collection of essays that provide a wonderful introduction into the realm of integral thinking as being brought into foresight and futures studies. They suggest a broader, more-encompassing framework for understanding the future and providing context for what's going on today. Two essays exploring foresight in everyday life and conclude that "foresight is something that can be improved with practice." The second entry looks at how two leading practicioners, Richard Slaughter and Sohail Inayatullah, are applying critical thinking to foresight and challenging the taken-for-granted and probing for hidden assumptions. The third brings integral thinking to critique national science and technology foresight exercises. The final entry is a collection of three papers on the topic of "Reframing Environmental Scanning" that makes the case for a new approach and then lays out early progress in that direction.

Keywords: Foresight, Integral futures, critical futures, Wilber, environmental scanning, technology foresight, causal layered analysis, spiral dynamics

It is with great pleasure that I recommend to you the first volume of the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) Monograph Series 2003. It is emblematic of the leading-edge work in foresight that's been going on at AFI the last few years under the direction of futurist Richard Slaughter. AFI is housed Swinburne University within the school of Entrepreneurialism, and that spirit has permeated the program. Slaughter has gladly seized the opportunity to re-think the purposes of foresight and futures studies, which will benefit not only those endeavors but its customers, such as higher education.

Slaughter is driven by a conviction that futures studies had somehow lost its way, no longer providing a useful guide to what he terms "the civilizational challenge." Those with long memories may recall the parallel to the Club of Rome's "Global Problematique." What's different is the prescription offered. It's drawn primarily from Integral Philosopher Ken Wilber[1], who is a grand synthesizer of the works of hundreds of scholars and the great wisdom traditions in an attempt to devise a "theory of everything[2]" or meta-framework for understanding what's going on in the world today. Slaughter dubs his & his students' interpretation of Wilber's work as integral futures.

As Slaughter has laid out in previous pieces, the problem that civilization, and this includes futures studies and education, has run into is what Wilber calls "flatland[3]." This is the focus on measurable phenomena visible on the thin façade of the surface at the expense of deeper underlying drivers that can only be accessed by "probing beneath the surface" via interpretation. Flatland values the measurable and ignores or pooh-poohs the "squishy" or interpretive. Yet, as Wilber et al point out, this essentially means ignoring phenomena simply because they are more difficult to access, but herein may lay just the kind of information and knowledge we need to address the civilization challenge and all its manifestations in areas such as futures studies and education.

The AFI work has been steadily progressing over the last few years. They've hosted several local symposiums, and have invited overseas futurists – myself included – to visit with the students and speak with local business and educational groups. They've been participating in international conferences and publishing in scholarly journals. Now, they have pulled together some of the early "best of" and some additional new pieces into a first volume monograph series.

A series such as this is surely long overdue in the realm of foresight and futures studies. You will not be long into a discussion about what futures studies needs before someone will suggest a solid academic

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[1] For an excellent overview of Wilber's works, see Www.worldofkenwilber.com

[2] Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*, Boston: Shambala, 2000)

[3] Richard Slaughter, "Transcending Flatland: implications of Ken Wilber's metanarrative for Futures Studies," *Futures* 30: 6, pp 519-533 (1998).

research base. The kinds of products we have been dreaming for from this academic base have been delivered to us here in this series. This is great news for educators looking for ways to provide a stronger theoretical base to help their students think about the future.

The monographs are around 40-50 pages each and attractively bound in colored card stock. The diversity of topics and approaches is admirable and makes for pleasant reading. There is no cookie-cutter approach here. Let's take a look at the specific pieces.

To kick off, we have two essays exploring foresight in everyday life. Each takes a different perspective -- the first looks at future time perspective. First we have "Foresight in Everyday Life" from doctoral student Peter Hayward. He has already had a career in the tax department before deciding to enroll at AFI. He delves into and reports on research relating to foresight and the individual. This has obvious implications to understanding how students think about the future.

Hayward concludes that "foresight can be considered a natural phenomena, part of the normal functioning of human beings." It's not just the realm of the futurist. Further, foresight is an individual cognitive characteristic that affects the behaviors of planning, goal-setting, and decision-making. Factors like social learning, enculturation, and education, can act to enhance or deaden this capacity. Yes, the foresight capacity is one we can help cultivate, and education plays a key role in this cultivation.

The second essay looks for evidence of foresight in everyday life. Here we see the range of daily foresight activities, including:

- Making preparations for a likely event, e.g., farmers, insurance, savings
- Discerning and then adopting the most suitable course of action, e.g., health check ups, a stitch in time saves nine
- Acting with discrimination, profundity, compassionate understanding and sagacious wisdom – actions informed not solely by what is know at the time, but also what has been learned in the past

He discusses the biology of foresight and notes that animals were operating in the perpetual present until the evolution of the cerebral cortex enabled the key properties of conceptual thought and memory, self-sense, and linguistic capabilities. In turn, these enabled our ability to conceptualize the past and the future.

He notes the evidence for some correlation between foresight and the traits of intelligence and openness – foresight practitioners should be happy to hear this, and perhaps it can serve as an inducement to students.

Another interesting insight is that an individual who is feeling good tends to pay less attention to external information and instead assimilates information in terms of pre-existing models of the world, or in the vernacular, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." It turns out that individuals with a more negative or at least skeptical orientation carry a more externally focused thinking style conducive to foresight. The negative affect operates something like an alarm to switch focus to potential threats. "The power of negative thinking" is not likely to catch on as a slogan, but the value of such thinking for survival may make us feel less guilty about occasionally being accused of being gloom-and-doomers.

Both pieces ended with several research questions that we hope subsequent research will be able to address. The practical application of this research is that we bring foresight out of the exclusive realm of the professional and show it's part of everybody's daily life -- especially students. The key lesson – foresight is something that can be improved with practice.

The second piece is "Critique to Cultural Recovery: Critical Futures Studies and Causal Layered Analysis" from student Jose Ramos, who has traveled the globe extensively in recent years and has developed a strong commitment to create local and global communities of foresight. His goal here is to broaden our understanding of the critical futures approach by exploring the lives and works of two of its leading practitioners: Richard Slaughter and Sohail Inayatullah. This approach is perhaps less familiar to those in the US – note that both are based in Australia -- although Inayatullah is not affiliated with the AFI.

Critical futures studies "can be understood as studies of futures that take as a primary consideration the analysis and reformulation of the way we know our world (epistemology), worldview, and the social construction of reality.' In simpler words, it applies critical thinking to futures studies, and challenges the taken-for-granted and looks for hidden assumptions. Slaughter developed a Transformation Cycle (T-Cycle) to depict the four general stages of critical futures.

- Breakdown of meaning
- Re-conceptualization
- Conflict and negotiation
- Selective legitimation

The essays take us through the lives of the protagonists and show how their particular paths influenced their philosophy and work. Ramos cleverly outlines the evolution of Slaughter's thinking by taking us through the four stages of the very T-Cycle he developed. Perhaps no idea more appropriately characterizes Slaughters critical thinking than the urgent need to "renegotiate the social order" in order to create a sustainable society. A central challenge is that the existing order is taken for granted, yet it we who have created it, and we can choose to change if we so desire. This renegotiating will require "alternative epistemes, cultural worldviews, and discourses beyond what's currently offered through mainstream pop and problem-oriented futures work. We can only hope futures students will agree that these topics are worthwhile.

The primary focus of the second essay is the development of the causal layered analysis[4] (CLA) technique by Inayatullah. Interestingly, a connection between the profiled futurists is that Inayatullah used Slaughter's conception of multiple layers or reality and "probing beneath the surface" as an underpinning for his technique. He also draws heavily upon the work of Indian futurist PR Sarkar for inspiration, which he has helped bring into the futures field. This is another indication of the very inclusive nature of the works here – they are truly global and multi-cultural in perspective.

There are horizontal and vertical dimensions to CLA. The horizontal refers to "the plurality of discourses/worldviews/epistemes. The vertical refers to depth, the structures and layers that underlie social and cultural existence. He refers to the surface level as the litany. As we learned in the first essay, so much of modern life remains stuck at this surface level. But underneath it are the social causes, which in turn are influenced by worldviews, and ultimately driven metaphors and myths. He incorporates the tools of postmodern critique to weave the analysis of a phenomenon across and underneath in ways that unearth insights that escape conventional approaches.

The admiration of the author for his subjects shines through. The piece is a tribute, not a critique, which some may find irony in given the topic. A nice feature of this piece is an after word, which although relatively brief, ties together the two stories through comparison and contrast. But one comes away feeling that this is likely only the beginning of a methodological renaissance that will emerge as more is learned about integral futures.

The third entry is "Wider and Deeper: A Review and Critique of Science & Technology Foresight Exercises in the 1990s" by AFI graduate student Andrew Wynberg. This analysis of foresight activities is desperately needed in the futures field. There has been precious little review and critique of futures activities, which in part contributes to a lack of quality control. The field is heavily biased toward the applied end, where there is less time available for non-revenue generating critique. In most fields this role falls to academia, where again the lack of a solid academic base has led to a hole. Hopefully, this monograph series is a first step toward filling this hole.

[4] Sohail Inayatullah "Causal Layered Analysis," http://www.metafuture.org/Articles/CausalLayeredAnalysis.htm

It's noted that "science and technology foresight exercises have been undertaken for the last four decades in over twenty countries." The critique outlines the objectives, the methods used, and the patterns that have emerged.

Wynberg concludes these foresight exercises have remained largely within the "pop futures" level of work identified by Slaughter. "The characteristic message at this level is characterized by the idea that science and technology will always make our lives better and better." These exercises only look at more R&D as the solution, and don't consider other potential solutions, such as social and institutional responses. Another somewhat alarming conclusion was that "instead of a new rational, consensus-building process….new priorities were little different from existing research programs."

The analysis goes on to suggest alternative ways of carrying out these exercises that would involve questioning business as usual. For instance, the exercises could look at science and technology priorities in four different scenarios:

- Breakdown
- Repressive or over-managed societies
- Ecological decentralism
- Transformational societies

Also, critical tools such as causal layered analysis could be used in the exercises. But the reality is that those commissioning these exercises really don't want to do this. Let's hope that future conveners of such activities take a different perspective and look for ways to improve the utility of these exercises. If so, they'll find the critique here chock full of useful and practical insights. Students, too, would benefit from applying this critical approach to any topic they are exploring in their studies.

The last entry in this initial volume is a collection of three papers under the topic of "Reframing Environmental Scanning" brought together by Joseph Voros, Senior Lecturer at AFI. Serious students of scanning may recognize these earlier versions of these papers have been previously published. As one of these "serious" students, I can still report with pleasure that enjoyed re-reading each, particularly as a package deal. One can clearly recognize that the authors have built upon the ideas of the previous papers – together they tell a continuous and well-connected story.

First is Professor Chun Wei Choo of the University of Toronto's "The Art of Scanning the Environment." Choo reviews the literature on scanning and extracts the essentials into a standard framework for environment scanning. He defines environmental scanning as "the acquisition and use of information about events, trends, and relationships in an organization's external environment, the knowledge of which would assist management in planning the organization's future course of action."

He surveys and outlines the various systems that organizations employ and identifies best practices. An interesting finding is that "successful programs take three to five years to mature." One wonders how many organizations in today's "deliver now" climate will be patient enough to wait three to five years. But this is the message we futurists and students must bring to our clients.

Second we have what I'll term an "instant classic" from Richard Slaughter called "A New Framework for Environmental Scanning." He cites three reasons that environmental scanning as conventionally practiced is insufficient:

- The typical empirical scanning frame overlooks phenomena that do not respond to empirical ways of knowing
- Organizations are located in a wider milieu that is experience dysfunction, stress, and upheaval on an unprecedented scale
- Organizations need access to richer, deeper outlooks and more thoughtful innovation strategies

The solutions to these issues lie in reframing the approach. Here Slaughter brings in the work of integral philosopher Ken Wilber. Wilber's meta-framework "distinguishes four domains within which different phenomena are located and thus different ways of knowing are employed." These four new focus of scanning are:

- The inner world of individual identity, meaning and purpose
- The inter-subjective social/cultural world
- The external world of the individual
- The collective external world

A key benefit of this new framework is access a broader and deeper range of insights.
Having applied this new framework to my own scanning, I immediately discovered a limited range and overly shallow level of analysis. Applying the new framework is remedying these deficiencies and promises to generate the fresh insights that have been lacking in recent years.

The collection is capstoned by Voros with "Reframing Environmental Scanning: An Integral Approach." Where Slaughters piece perhaps does more diagnosis of what's been wrong with scanning, Voros jumps in with details on the solution. He builds and enhances the preliminary suggestions laid out in Slaughter's piece.

Voros is quite adamant about the importance of the scanner vis-à-vis the actual approach used: "environmental scanning is less about technique and methodology and more about openness of mind. In fact, I would go further and claim that it is incalculably more about the interior consciousness of the scanner than it is about the quantity of information and/or the numbers of sources being scanned in the exterior world." This is an important message to educators. Too often the emphasis has been on the tools rather than the practicioner. This work suggests a reprioritization.

The spiral dynamics system of Beck and Cowan is introduced to help explain the Wilber meta-framework. This will prove especially helpful to those familiar with the system; to those unfamiliar, it will likely prove intriguing enough to merit further study. In my own case, I have subsequently become quite familiar with spiral dynamics and now count it as a key part of my conceptual tool kit.

The tool of cross level analysis is introduced. While introduced almost tentatively here – described as a "notion" rather than a tool – I will again interject that I have found it a most helpful tool for improving the breadth and depth of my analysis of scanning hits. In a nutshell, the tool suggests that while we will tend to locate a scanning hit in one of Wilber's four quadrants, we must also consider it's manifestations in the other three quadrants.

After a few examples, you begin to see how a seemingly one-quadrant phenomena does indeed manifest itself in the others – and here you begin to get to insights that normally would be overlooked. For instance, we might do a survey and find that people's intention is to do more for protecting the environment. But the behavior we witness is people won't actually pay more for environmentally-friendly products. At the same time, the culture values economic growth over environmental protection, and lastly we see this manifested as exceeding the planet's carrying capacity.

The only quibble I have with this entry -- and perhaps I'm being greedy here – is that I would have liked an after word that wrapped the pieces together for the reader going through these for the first time, and perhaps a hint of what's to come.

Educators will benefit from exploring the perspective described here. These essays provide wonderful introduction into the realm of integral thinking as being brought into futures studies. They suggest a broader, more-encompassing framework for understanding the future and providing context for what's going on today. It is an attempt at "grand theory" that this reviewer suggests comes closer than any others he has seen. Let's hope then that this first volume serves as a delicious appetizer, prelude to several even meatier courses in the future.

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