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Futures

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Narrative foresight



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 January 2015

Received in revised form 1 August 2015

Accepted 25 August 2015

Available online 30 October 2015

Keywords:

Narrative foresight

Causal layered analysis

Metaphor

Case studies

Individual and organizational change

ABSTRACT

Narrative foresight focuses on the stories individuals, organizations, states and civilizations tell themselves about the future. Narrative foresight moves futures thinking from a focus on new technologies and generally to the question of what's next, to an exploration of the worldviews and myths that underlie possible, probable and preferred futures. It is focused on transforming the current story – metaphor or myth – held to one that supports the desired future. From a theoretical account of the narrative turn, case studies are presented of the practice of narrative foresight.

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1. Introduction: context, theory, and practice

This article builds on our previous theoretical work (i.e. Inayatullah, 1990, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2010; Milojević, 2002, 2008, 2014; Milojević & Izgarjan, 2014; Inayatullah & Milojević, 2015 and pedagogical practice. It develops a significant focus within our overall pedagogy in futures studies, utilised in many countries (i.e. Australia, Pakistan, Serbia, Singapore, Iran, Bangladesh, South Korea, the United States, Taiwan, and Malaysia¹), settings (i.e. governments, universities, non-governmental organisations, corporations, professional associations) and within various teaching frameworks (i.e. speeches, half or one-day courses, week-long courses, and semester or year-long courses) over the past twenty plus years.

Very recently, a significant number of academic articles has emphasised the great potential of narrative approaches for futures thinking and strategy development (i.e. Milojević, 2014; Bussey, 2014; Jarva, 2014; Li, 2014; Miller et al., 2014; Spencer & Salvatico, 2015; von Stackelberg & Jones, 2014). Others have called for a general “shift to a narrative paradigm” (Paschen & Ison, 2014, p. 1083). Further, the past several decades have seen what some have termed “an explosion of interest in narrative” (Herman, Manfred, & Ryan, 2005; p. ix), wherein narrative based inquiry became a “central concern in a wide range of disciplinary fields and research contexts” (ibid.). Initially mostly found in literary theory and then linguistics, narrative approaches in communication theory, education, psychology as well as social sciences in general have since increased in popularity. Indeed, a whole new field of narrative therapy has emerged (i.e. Angus & McLeod, 2004; Denborough, 2010; Monk et al., 1996; Morgan, 2000; White, 2000), helping individuals move away from unhelpful and

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¹ These are countries where we conducted most of our teachings and workshops. Other countries where narrative foresight has been used include (alphabetic listing): Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Indonesia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Switzerland, Thailand, and Turkey.

distressing storytelling towards stories that shape their identities and relationships in line with the possibilities of desired presents and futures (Milojević, 2014).

The use of narrative has been critical for futures studies as well. Various uses of narrative, e.g. framing of new and reframing of old narratives, have been part and parcel of futures thinking from the very beginning. In a similar way that narrative has been used in history – to investigate patterns of change – narrative has also been used in futures studies since the development of the field. Thick descriptions of potential events and conditions through the use of scenarios, for example, have heavily relied on the use of narrative. Trend analysis, as well, outlines a particular sequence of events wrapped as a meaningful story, even as it claims to be narrative-free, that is, it is quantitative and thus story is controlled for. Visioning and backcasting provide detailed and robust narratives presented as a sequential movement through time—from preferable to plausible futures towards the present moment. Utopian and science fiction literature is as well based on the power of story. Indeed, the skilful use of narrative is the foundation of all six pillars of futures studies² and within all four types of futures studies³ – empirical, interpretive, critical and anticipatory action learning.

Mapping narrative shifts is crucial when investigating social change. Various social change agents and social movements have utilised the telling and re-telling of stories about pasts, presents and futures as one of the key strategies within their overall activism. Yet it was only after the poststructuralist, postmodern turn and the advance of social constructionism that terms such as narrative in general or meta-narrative in particular have entered into broader academic use. This article focuses on further understanding the role of narrative when thinking about the future; both through synthesising previous theoretical work and via the more practical use of narrative as a strategy for engaging individuals and organizations during futures workshops.

When teaching futures studies (and/or engaging in transformative action research) in previously mentioned diverse places and settings, the crucial importance of a more explicit engagement with a narrative—an overarching story, a guiding myth⁴ or expressed as a metaphor—has increasingly become apparent to us. Our initial work in the area, more implicit and intuitive, has since been crystallised in explicit and structured ways. This article thus defines and describes our pedagogical focus in futures studies, summarises the evolution of narrative foresight approaches in our work, overviews some theoretical influences that facilitated narrative foresight approaches we use and, lastly, depicts case studies, examples of action research and learning that assisted in developing it.

In terms of context, narrative foresight straddles the boundary between the empirical, interpretive, critical, and action learning modes of futures studies. It uses the forecasts of the empirical but recasts them as possible stories. That is, unlike the empirical approach of futures studies, which sees narratives (qua data) as accurate and a precise description of an objective reality, narrative foresight, in the tradition of interpretive, critical and poststructural futures studies, sees reality as constantly negotiated by stakeholders. It focuses on metaphors and myths within the interpretive. Like the critical, it challenges assumptions and interests but does so to transform or enrich the worldview of the questioner, not just to disrupt the categories of that which is being questioned. Action emerges from this deep questioning of data, meaning, worldview and metaphor. Narrative foresight as well inquires as to the implications of deep narratives and the relationship of the narratives held by self and other.

However, narrative foresight does differ from these core approaches of futures studies as it is neither the control of empirical science, the intimacy of the interpretive, nor the distancing of poststructuralism that informs. Narrative foresight focuses not on the veracity of the future—is a future true or false—but on discovering and creating new stories that better meet needs and desires. The purpose of narrative foresight is thus to facilitate desired (preferred/wished for) futures.

2. Narrative: importance, meaning and change

It has been recognised for quite some time that narrative is one of the primary modes of knowing for humans. The destiny of the world, wrote Harold Goddard (1951, p. 208), “is determined less by the battles that are lost and won than by the stories it loves and believes in”. Battles are fought and later forgotten, unless immortalised within a story (ibid.). Stories, on the other hand, are told and remembered even as they grow old (ibid.). From our very birth, writes narrative therapist Michael White (2004, p. 38), we are all “active, impassioned meaning makers in search of plausible stories”. As soon as we are born, we “emerge into a plot thick with anticipation of our arrival” (Osatuke et al., 2004, p. 194). The narratives that we encounter “represent a rich mixture of historical, societal, cultural, and family influences” and much of our socialising consists of hearing other people’s own personal experiences and understanding of the world via sharing of stories (ibid.).

Narrative and time are intrinsically linked. “A static description cannot be a narrative” (Talib, 2011), it is movement through time which is essential to it. As Paul Ricoeur (1984, p. 3) has explained, time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised by a manner of narrative; likewise, narrative is only intelligible and meaningful to the extent that it portrays

² The six pillars of futures studies: 1. Mapping the past, present and future (methods: shared history, environmental scanning, futures triangle, futures landscape), 2. Anticipating the future (methods: emerging issues analysis, futures wheel), 3. Timing the Future (methods: macrohistory and the Sarkar game), 4. Deepening the future (methods: causal layered analysis and metaphors), 5. Creating alternatives to the present (methods: scenarios, nuts and bolts), 6. Transforming the present and creating the future (methods: visioning, backcasting, and, anticipatory action learning). Inayatullah, 2007.

³ Four Types of Futures Studies: Empirical, Interpretive, Critical and Anticipatory Action Learning. Inayatullah, 2007, p. 198–199.

⁴ A collective story that gives meaning, not a ‘mistaken tale’ to be corrected via rationalism or empiricism.

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