

# A Consideration of the Nature and Place of Futures Studies in an Academic Program: A Case Study at Kyoto Sangyo University

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## Abstract

While almost everyone (at least in first world countries) has seen the latest Hollywood science fiction creations, with their incredible visions of the future aided by evermore fantastic special effects, the study of the future, Futures Studies, is a relatively unknown area of concern and research. In this essay, a brief background of Futures Studies and its concerns will be followed by the discussion of a course in Futures Studies that has been taught at Kyoto Sangyo University for the last five years - how the course was conceived, the appropriateness of the area to the students, and finally how the course “empowers” students to construct and reach for a “preferred future.”

**Keywords:** Futures Studies, content-based instruction

## Background

In a 1932 speech on the BBC, the noted writer and accredited founder of Futures studies (Wagar, 2004), H.G. Wells stated;

It seems an odd thing to me that though we have thousands and thousands of professors and hundreds of thousands of students of history working upon the records of the past, there is not a single person anywhere who makes a whole-time job of estimating the future consequences of new inventions and new devices. There is not a single Professor of Foresight in the world. But why shouldn't there be? All these new things, these new inventions and new powers, come crowding along; every one fraught with consequences, and yet it is only after something has hit us hard that we set about dealing with it. (Slaughter, 1989, pp3-4)

In the same short speech, H.G. Wells went on to predict the creation of cruise or ICBM missiles and the end of the tyranny of distance that the internet has brought us today, as well as to point out that without careful consideration and planning, we would be more likely to end in

conflict than at peace.

In 1970, Alvin Toffler's internationally best-selling book, *Future Shock*, took this concern one step further. He predicted that many of the "Citizens of the world's richest and most technologically advanced nations... will find it increasingly painful to keep up with the incessant demand for change that characterizes our time." (p.9) He demonstrated the enormous acceleration of change by pointing out that if you divide the last 50,000 years into 80-year lifetimes, the "overwhelming majority of all the material goods we use in daily life today have been developed within the present... lifetime." (Toffler, 1970, p.14) He goes on to point out that within one such lifetime, many first-world countries have not only changed from agricultural societies to manual labor industrial societies, but also have managed to move on to being service economies as well. People's feeling of inability to cope with such rapid change predicted and labeled 'future shock' by Toffler, has indeed come about, as people do indeed seem to feel unable to control the forces changing our world and are pessimistic about the future. (Slaughter, 2005, Hicks, 2004, Hammond, 1998)

Any ability to adapt to or cope with change must come from an ability to analyze where the world is going and what may be the consequences of actions and inventions - as Slaughter (1995) states, people must be "empowered" to deal with change. Business, the military, governments and educational institutions have all long used a version of Futures Studies to plan for the future, the best example for readers from Kyoto Sangyo University being the current Grand Design being considered at this university. But how are such plans made? Where are the skills for making them learnt?

Futures Studies as a university field of study is relatively new and young, and thus is facing challenges both to its credibility and its place as a university subject. (Morgan, 2003)<sup>1)</sup> As a field of research and training, it has been around for about 50 years. (Dator, 2002, Massini, 2002) A 2002 study by the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, (which itself has programs up to the graduate level in Futures Studies) states, "some 50 universities around the world offer some sort of futures program. Perhaps half of these offer post-graduate degrees in FS (*Future Studies*)." (p.2) Those offering degree programs include the University of Hawaii and the Moscow State University. Those with futures programs include the Université de Paris 1/La Sorbonne and George Washington University, while those with courses in Futures Studies include Aichi University and the University of California Berkeley. Naturally, this list is far from all-inclusive, and there are other courses, such as those taught by one of the central figures of the Future Studies movement, Wendell Bell, at Yale University. While the presence of such courses at other universi-

ties is by no means a perfect argument for the study of Futures Studies at this university, the caliber of many of these institutions would seem to indicate that it is an area that deserves attention.

But what of the scope of many of these programs? What do they include that make them candidates for a list of 'Futures Studies' courses and programs? What does 'Futures Studies' incorporate?

Morgan (2003) points out that, "Like many fields in academe, futures consists of a small area of specialized knowledge that has varying levels of connection to other academic disciplines and to wider areas in society at large." (p.5) He suggests that Future Studies developed from a combination of the concern and effects created by the 'rapid expansion of technology' and the growing scarcity of resources, and describes it as an 'action-oriented field,' one that is "not merely forecasting (as meteorology forecasts the weather) or predicting (as a fortune-teller predicts events); Futures Studies involves the exposition of and preparation for *preferred futures*." (p.9) Thus, 'Futures Studies' is not attempting to "predict" the future in terms of foretelling exactly what will happen to any one person, individual, or country — even if many entered the field with that in mind. (Dator, 2002) It is more concerned with looking at a range of possible futures and empowering people to try to move themselves towards their preferred future. As Dator elaborates in his introduction to the 2002 book *Advancing Futures: Future Studies in Higher Education*;

Future Studies... is interested not in itself furthering any particular view of the future, but rather in furthering both narrowly professional as well as broadly participative inquiry into the future; understanding the roots and consequences of each of the manifold images of the future that exist in people's minds and in support of people's actions. We are interested in identifying and understanding the many different images of the future that exist, understanding why certain people have certain images rather than others, how their different images of the future lead to specific actions or inactions in the present, and how present actions or inactions themselves create certain aspects of the future. (Dator, 2002, p.7)

A futurist will discuss, explore, map out possibilities, theorize and seek to predict the future, but cannot create it. (Massini, 2002, Slaughter, 2002a) It is an important area for all of us. As Slaughter (2002a) points out, "While not everyone will need to become an official paid-up futurist, everyone does need, and will need, the understandings, skills, and competencies that emerge from it." (p.92)

A war in Afghanistan can affect the entire world economy. An execution in an Arab country can be seen by anyone in the world with access to a computer almost as soon as it has happened. The world is so interlinked that each and every region and country is linked and the actions of all must be taken into account. As Hammond (1998) summarizes, “Today, humanity faces a fundamentally different challenge – that of managing a planet and a global human civilization in ways that will sustain both indefinitely.” (p.6) The consideration, awareness of, and teaching of global issues such as war, poverty, the power of the U.N., women’s rights and child soldiers is undoubtedly vital at all levels of society and education. However, informed, planned action is also important. “Over the next half century, human society will undergo a profound demographic transformation, experience fundamental shifts in the global balance of economic and political power, and cope with nearly continuous technological change... To decide which actions are critical... requires that we know more about what the future may hold.” (Hammond, 1998, p.6-7) This is where ‘Futures Studies’ becomes absolutely vital, both to education, and to society as a whole.

### **Futures Studies for English Majors at Kyoto Sangyo University: The Setting and Reasons for the Choice of Futures Studies**

The English Department of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Kyoto Sangyo introduced a content-based teaching core to its intensive curriculum 6 years ago<sup>2</sup>. The course was established as a three times-a-week course in the first year, and twice a week in the second year, with the second year changing to three times a week from 2005. Each class is taught by one teacher, who covers a set content area two or three times a week, for a set number of weeks (currently the number is 9 or 10), and then classes are rotated on to the next subject. The topic of the content area is, for the most part, the choice of individual instructors (after liaison with course coordinators), and Futures Studies was introduced as one component by the author at the second-year level five years ago. There were five reasons for this choice of area.

1 – Topics for the content area had to be of interest to students and it was felt that this area had a wide range of possibilities. As Stryker and Leaver (1997) note, content-based instruction, “represents a significant departure from traditional foreign language teaching methods in that language proficiency is achieved by shifting the focus of instruction from the learning of language *per se* to the learning of language through the study of subject matter.” (p.5) They state that such a curriculum has three important aspects, a “subject-matter core,” utilization of “authentic language and texts” and, most importantly to this article, that it “is appropriate to

the needs of specific groups of students.” (Stryker and Leaver, 1997, p.5) Students at the university level are incredibly interested in the future, as they should be, and young people are often thinking of their future. (Hicks, 2004)

2 – In past teaching it had been found that students often had quite impossible dreams and plans for the future, as well as little developed ability to analyze or recognize trends. This is reflected in what many futurists teaching in education have found, one of the more famous examples being Wendell Bell at Yale University (Bell, 2002), and in much research on popular views of the future. (Hicks, 2004)

3 – Similarly, it was found that students have little historical consciousness, which inhibits their ability to appreciate where society stands, where it comes from, and hence, where it might be going. Brief historical backgrounds of things such as the history of food are an important aspect of the Futures Studies course.

4 – The Futures Studies component was readily adaptable to reinforcing certain grammatical and lexical areas. While this Futures Studies course is by no means a theme-based course, that is, a course based on grammar with supplementary materials based on a theme that fits around the grammatical area (Stryker and Leaver, 1997), the grammatical areas raised by the subject do form a nice grouping to review areas covered in the students’ first year (for example, different forms of discussing the future and conditionals - the classical science fiction story being based on a ‘What if...?’ question (James and Mendelsohn, 2004)) and reinforce areas covered in their second-year more traditional grammar classes.

5 – It was a good follow-up or introduction to the Global Studies component being taught by another instructor in the same intensive content-based course, as Global Studies seems to be concerned more with awareness raising and current issues, rather than possible future issues and life choices.

While the Futures Studies component sets out to work on student dreams, it is not intended to deflate them with heavy doses of pessimistic reality. Dreams are important, but if they are unattainable or unreasonable from the start, there is little chance of their coming true. As Dator (2002) states;

While nothing good or bad will happen without your dreams, “appropriate action” is also necessary to make your dreams come true, and what appropriate action is depends not upon your (or even the collective) will alone, but also upon environmental factors over which you may have little or no control, but which you must understand and deal with successfully. (*You must learn to*) “surf... the tsunamis of change.” (Dator, 2002, p.8)

## **Elements of the Futures Studies course**

The Futures Studies course consists of a series of modules, with a varying array of assignments – both written and presentation style. Classes are conducted only in English, with a significant amount of homework, and classroom activities utilize pair work and group work a great deal. There are also mini-lectures and class discussion on certain subjects. What is taught to each and every class and the order in which it is taught is different as each class has different needs, interests, and capabilities.

### **1 – Setting the stage**

The first hurdle is getting students to think about and be more aware of time and change, and the fact that they too will be older and that their parents were once younger. In addition, students need to be made aware of the fact that we all carry a lot of baggage and often have forgotten how or where we learnt things, in particular in our younger more formative years. Sections of the 1968 movie *2001 A Space Odyssey* are shown as, in examining the future, it starts with the past, and so does this course. Students are asked to discuss their own early memories, to try and recall recent history, and to research about their parents' own lives at a similar age. Students often find this surprising, and sobering, as they realize their parents were young once too – and so too they themselves will become old.

Two classes are devoted to encouraging students to examine their own values, in particular in terms of family and relationships, since, as Slaughter (2005) quotes Voros (2003), “scanning the environment... depends very much on the eye of the beholder... What the eye sees is conditioned by what lies behind the eye of the beholder, in the interior consciousness of the perceiving subject.” (p.283) How can one think of the future without thinking about what is important to oneself, and how can one think more objectively about the future without realizing how one's values affect one's outlook? The topic of relationships is used as non-conventional relationships (for example, gay marriages, marriages in name only, and five-year contract marriages) are often quite eye opening, shocking and potentially real to students, and thus particularly effective.

One final technique that is used to “jar us (*the students*) out of familiar assumptions and challenge us to think about how the world might be different... is to write a scenario as a ‘future history.’” (Hammond, 1998, p.16) One such ‘future history,’ a letter written by a boy in 2046 to his grandfather about how life in 2046 is different to that of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

(now), is used to do just that to students. The letter is an award winning one, written by a high school student, and is not easy, but there has been consistent good feedback and interest on the part of students about it every time it has been used. In preparation, students are thus made aware of recent history and their own mortality, while being given the opportunity to look at their own times from a future perspective. The stage is set.

## **2 — Popular images of the future**

Trying to predict the future and looking back into the past for future guidance is an age-old practice. “In ancient times, our ancestors often sought guidance in stories, such as those that give rise to the myths and legends found in every culture.” (Hammond, 1998, p.13) To introduce the topic of considering the future as well as gain student interest, several lessons are devoted to lectures and practical exercises concerning more ‘traditional’ or ‘popular’ forms of future prediction — fortune telling (and superstitions as a whole) and certain forms of psychological tests. Student interest in these areas is high, and the language of speculation, so important to futures work, is easily incorporated here. The creation of original methods of fortune telling sets the ground for more recent approaches to considering the future.

Many people’s images of what Futures Studies is begin with science fiction. Science fiction is, in some ways, a more powerful vehicle of future speculation than traditional academic discourse. (James and Mendlesohn, 2004) Despite the dismissal of science fiction by some futurists, it has been the starting point for many in the field, including Richard Slaughter, a major player. Science fiction, despite its often-negative view (with technology or ecocatastrophe threatening our existence), often portrays an extremely well illustrated and frighteningly detailed scenario of the future, with a range of complex issues and fears just under the surface. (Morgan, 2003, Slaughter, 1995, 2002a) For this reason, it is used as an introduction to scenarios, while also encouraging students to consider the messages and overall intent of movies. It is very familiar to students and has been found quite effective. Students are then encouraged to consider which movie themes they consider possible and when they might come true, then they are required to do a mini-presentation on one science fiction movie, and finally create and present their own scenario.

## **3 — Technology**

Technology is a major influence on society, values and lifestyle (Dator, 2002, p.9) and so consideration of its possible effects should be a major concern of any course in Futures Studies. The issue of technology in this course is, interestingly enough, introduced with the

history of food. Students are made aware of the debt to all parts of the world that our everyday diet has, and are also informed of how recently many of the foods that are eaten everyday in Japan were introduced. The next stage involves exercises investigating inventions, such as the television and the personal computer, their availability to the public in the last century (the twentieth) and the pace of change.

During the consideration of food and technology, it is carefully pointed out how new the research into food is, and the nature of history as a subject and the internet as a source of information are discussed. This illustrates several important factors. First, that history is a constant reinterpretation of the facts and thus often biased or simply wrong (a date being wrong being a good example of this.) Second, that the skills a historian uses in looking at the past, through the examination of evidence and formation of views of what actually happened, are actually what one needs in considering the future. After all, historians are storytellers just as much as any novelist is, and the past is just as accessible to them as the future. (Wagar, 2002) And third, the Internet in many ways is unreliable as often information is unchecked by ‘informed opinion,’ and ‘informed opinion’ may well change its ideas.

To end the technology section, students are required to take a piece of current technology (often in the form of an everyday object) and forecast the trend of how it will change and be used in the near future. They then discuss what impact it may have. In addition, they look at several science fiction movies and examine the technology displayed there and its differences to what we have today.

#### **4 – Dreams, plans, practicalities and impracticalities**

Having considered their own values and background, other people’s versions and visions of the future in science fiction, as well as the role of technology and how it may change, students are then encouraged to begin constructing their own vision of the future - both personal and from a point of view of technology and society.

First, they interview each other on their dreams for the future. Then they construct models of how various aspects of life and technology (for example, leisure activities, communication and travel) will change over the next ten, twenty, and thirty years. Utilizing what they have done, they then try to create models of how their own lives will be at those same times, and write a long essay combining all of the above (with their dream, followed by their vision of what their own life and that of society and technology will be like at the above intervals), concluding with a paragraph on what they can do now to make their dream come true. In this way, students build a picture of their “preferred future,” and work together to think about how they can make



it come true. Presentation of this work to other students is one of the most important and central activities of this course, and one that many students have given good feedback on in commenting on the course.

### **5 — Where our images come from**

Obviously, the information sources we are exposed to dictate most, if not all, of what we think. “Powerful groups use images to persuade others to buy products, consume particular resources or services and give support to projects.” (Slaughter, 1995, p.11) Editing choices in news, advertising content, images displayed on that incredibly powerful tool of the media, television, and in film, all affect how we perceive the world around us. Many students have thought little about this, or are unaware of issues that are important to their culture and society. One good example is the existence of *kisha* (reporters’) clubs in the Japanese media, and how that affects how the news is presented. For this reason, two to three lessons are devoted to media discussion and awareness. In pair work, students discuss their own media choices and opinions, lectures are given on aspects of the media and the media in Japan, then they create a piece of advertising and role play being editors of a newspaper and television news station.

As Masini (2002) points out, first world futurists from technologically advanced countries rich in human resources often make damaging recommendations to developing countries where similar resources do not exist. In the same way, students often forget that they are living in a first world country, and so the final lesson is a reminder both that they are living in what may be the future for many countries (at least in terms of technology) and that there are many in their own country that are not as well off as they. I have often found this a particularly effective way to end the course, as students tend to have a rather strong impression that they are particularly poor and badly off.

## **Conclusion**

The approach in teaching this Futures Studies is necessarily multi-disciplinary, covering a very wide range of issues and skills, including global issues and media education. “The philosophy of content-based instruction aims at empowering students to become independent learners and continue the learning process beyond the classroom.” (Stryker and Leaver, 1997, p.3) Similarly, the philosophy of Futures Studies is to “empower” (to borrow a term often used by Slaughter) people to cope with and direct the powerful currents driving society and the world at large today. Futures Studies as a course at Kyoto Sangyo University aims to combine these

two effects so that, hopefully, students become more independent language learners with a better idea of what they want and where they, and the world around them, are going - and the desire to effect that direction. As Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003) note, “The situation in which learners need to improve their second language skills for purposes of university study unites formal second language instruction with real and present functional needs. Here... communicative language teaching and needs-related, content-based instruction merge in their respective objectives.” (p.5)

Futures Studies at Kyoto Sangyo University is well-suited to the content-based intensive program in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, but as we are in a period of incredibly rapid change, such an approach is vital to all students in the university, and thus one would hope that Futures Studies could become part of the regular classes in other faculties.

#### 注

- 1) For example, Morgan (2003) quotes Boucher (2000) as pointing out that futures studies can be criticized for the fact that nearly all of those practicing futurists or educators who consider themselves futurists are not qualified to even hold a B.A. in the field and so there is a “lack of common ground and academic soundness” (p.10) to the field.
- 2) It should be noted that there is not the time, nor space, to discuss the appropriateness or theory of content-based teaching in this article. For those interested, Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003) is an excellent introduction to the topic, giving both theoretical background, examples, and guidance in implementation.

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## 「未来学」の本質と大学教育における位置について：

京都産業大学でのケーススタディー

クラフリン・マシュー

### 要 旨

少なくとも先進国に住んでいるほとんど誰もが、魔術を髣髴させる特撮の技術を駆使した最近のハリウッド製作の信じがたいほどの未来の創造世界を見ていると思われるが、未来についての研究、「未来学」は関心の領域としてまた研究分野としては比較的未開のものである。この論文においては、まず、「未来学」の背景とその広がりを簡単に紹介する。つぎに、過去5年間、京都産業大学の英語インテンシヴコースの教材として扱ってきた「未来学」についての検討を提示する。すなわち、学生たちにとってのこの研究領域「未来学」の適合性、および、「より良い未来」を構築・実現するためにいかに効果的であるかを論ずる。

キーワード：教材としての「未来学」