

From Future Workshops to Envisioning Alternative Futures [*]

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There are a handful of people to whom the future should be eternally grateful. They are those visionaries/activists of the 1960s and beyond who invented social inventing and the creation of desirable futures. Foremost among them, in my judgement, are Elise Boulding, Kenneth Boulding, Johan Galtung, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Magda Cordell McHale, John McHale, and, of course Robert Jungk. All the rest of us are merely timid and unimaginative followers in their footsteps. They were the creative and daring pioneers.

While it may be the case that it was Ossip Flechtheim who first invented futurology (futures studies) and Fred Polak who introduced the concept "images of the future", it was Kenneth Boulding and Elise Boulding who nurtured the concept of "images of the future" into its central place in futures studies, and Elise Boulding who demonstrated how the concept could become the centerpiece of practical future-oriented action.

Bertrand de Jouvenel, Johan Galtung, Magda McHale and John McHale (and, yes, many others) each contributed significant chunks to the substantive field of futures studies. It was Robert Jungk who put much of it together in his popular and effective future workshops.

What I intend to do here is to express my thanks to Robert Jungk (and indirectly, all the rest) for inventing action-oriented futures studies. I will do this first by reviewing briefly Jungk's concept and methods of future workshops, and then by describing, also very briefly, some of the kinds of future-oriented work we are doing now which is so heavily dependent on the base laid down by Jungk, the Bouldings, and the rest.

In Future Workshops: How to Create Desirable Futures, by Robert Jungk and Norbert Mullert (Published by the Institute for Social Inventions, UK, 1987), future workshops are described as having been invented in order to fill a gap in existing democratic systems which fail adequately to involve the people directly affected by political decisions into the decision-making process itself, and which also generally fail to consider the future at all.

While Jungk and Mullert say that future workshops can be used for "problem solving for organisations such as factories, co-ops and unions, schools and youth centres, pressure groups and voluntary organisations," (p. 11), the examples in the book actually focus mainly (though not exclusively) on neighborhoods and communities. They show how these localities (or other groups of citizens) can be organized into cohesive and effective political action units against established powerful institutions by future workshops.

The method of future workshops is defined initially as follows: "Typically, a future workshop can be divided into a preparatory phase and three workshop phases. The preparatory phase involves deciding on the topic and making the practical arrangements...." "The workshop itself begins with the critique phase, during which all the grievances and negative experiences related to the chosen topic are brought into the open. ... There then follows the fantasy phase, in which the participants come up with ideas in response to the problems, and with their desires, fantasies and alternative views. A selection is made of the most interesting notions and small working groups develop these into solutions and outline projects. The workshop concludes with the implementation phase, coming back down into the present with its power structures and constraints. It is at this stage that participants critically assess the chances of getting their projects implemented; identifying the obstacles and imaginatively seeking ways round them so as to draw up a plan of action." (p. 11f)

The rest of the book is devoted to an elaboration of the details and examples of carrying out each of these phases.

As Jungk and Mullert graciously acknowledge in their book, we here in Hawaii have been involved in similar exercises of what Alvin Toffler calls "anticipatory democracy." However, I would like to focus on a different aspect of our work which I also believe is deeply indebted to Jungk's future workshops. These are the alternative futures exercises which we have conducted over the years for a wide variety of existing groups, such as the Girl Scouts, the YMCA, the YWCA, credit-union leagues, several different organizations of home economists around the United States, many units of Hawaii state government, the judiciaries of several other US states, many small business and non-profit organizations, and the like.

These organizations differ from most of the groups which Jungk cites in that they are presently existing institutions, often with comparatively long histories. But they are also more or less in trouble in the present. They are no longer as influential, respected, or popular as they once were. They are uncertain about their current role and future mission. They wish to rethink who they are and where they are going.

Or at least some of their members or officers do.

That is one of the special features of many of the organizations with whom we work: they are internally divided, in turmoil, uncertain, as a group, of what to do. Of course, some individual members are very certain what the organization should be doing: it should just be getting on doing what it is supposed to be doing. There are too many alligators threatening to worry about draining the swamp. Futures workshops are a stupid diversion from the urgent tasks of the present.

Some other members may want to believe that it is possible to engage the services of a futurist who will accurately predict the real

future, and then tell the organization how to maximize its position in the future. Others, knowing this is impossible--and, indeed, dangerous even to hope for--have no desire to engage in any future oriented activity at all.

But, all else having failed, someone calls a futurist.

It is into this kind of an environment that we often step.

Under such circumstances, we have learned that we cannot follow Jungk's future workshops method exactly.

First of all, while we need to provide plenty of time to let those who are frustrated and angry with the way things are going--or aren't going--to have their say, to blow off steam, we also need to permit those who remember the good old days when things went well, when the organization was new, when their views were respected, to say so: to show how great the organization once was (and they themselves once were). "It is important that we respect the past, remembering that once it was all that was humanly possible".

The "oldtimers" in an organization often have great resources which are currently not being utilized, and they both resent that and may actually sabotage present activities as a consequence. Giving the past its positive due, no matter how irrelevant the past may seem to be for the future, is a very important, initial, activity, we have learned.

Then it is time to let people vent about the problems of the present (and, doing this after they have had to think respectfully of the past may make them somewhat more circumspect in their criticisms, though it should also make their criticisms more pointed and justifiable).

Nothing is forever. One of the most important things for any organization--or individual--to do, is to contemplate its demise. No institution has existed from the beginning of time. Each organization came into existence at some point in the past to serve some function of that period. Perhaps that function now is passe. Perhaps some other group(s) do better than yours does now. Perhaps your organization has stayed alive by abandoning its old reasons for being and has taken on new functions. But why do this? Why not just quietly go out of existence?

These and related questions must be seriously asked and answered by members of any organization before they contemplate the future. I have worked with many groups which admit that they really have no reason for surviving except to provide a job, and a paycheck, and a reason for being, for the people who work within it. They will often say, "sure, let the institution die--but only after I retire." I have never found an institution which has the courage to fold its tents and let its members move on to other things. But sometimes the individual members sense the tents are folding, or should fold, and move themselves on to greener pastures.

Our activities also differ from those described by Jungk in yet another way. In Jungk's future workshops, after the critique phase comes the fantasy phase where people express their preferred futures.

I think it is a serious mistake to ask people to engage in any kind of a preferred futures envisioning exercise until they have been challenged to examine their own various ideas about the future first. This is where the futurist plays her most important role: not of course in predicting the future and telling the enthralled throng what the future Will Be, but rather in structuring the situation so that the participants themselves are led to express, clarify, and modify their own individual and consensual images of the future. One part of that role is for the futurist to present in some dramatic, engaging way some of the elements (forces, components) in the past and present which might most strongly influence the future. These can be elements of continuity and familiarity as well as elements of change and novelty. But almost certainly in the future, the new and unfamiliar will vastly outnumber the tried and true. People need to find a way directly to experience this feature of the future.

So a second part of the process of easing people out of their unexamined ideas about the future is to place them into different "alternative futures" and to ask them to respond to questions concerning their life and work if they were to find themselves in some different kinds of futures. For example, we might place a meeting of twenty people into four groups of five persons each (or, a meeting of 200 people into 40 groups of five persons each). Each small group would then be given a one-page description of one of (say) four very different futures and asked to discuss among themselves how their present lives and work might be the same, or different, if they were to find themselves in this future.

At the end of the exercise, a representative from each (or a sample) of the four small group(s) briefly describes her assigned future, and her group's responses to it, to the meeting as a whole so that everyone comes to understand something about each alternative future, as well as the one they experienced more deeply.

It is at this point that we enter Jungk's "fantasy phase", though we do not call it that. We describe it as an opportunity to envision preferred futures; to brainstorm as wildly as you wish about what you would like the future to be. We urge everyone to understand that "any useful statement about the future should at first appear to be ridiculous"; that no preference or desire is too crazy to be expressed and considered. It is our experience that people are able to envision futures both more "realistically" and more imaginatively after they have had their awareness of the possibilities raised by participating in the exercises I outlined.

An alternative to our procedure might be for someone or group to take the various ideas produced during the fantasy phase of Jungk's workshops and weave them together into three or more alternative futures for small group consideration. However it is that the

alternative futures are generated, I do feel it is important that each person's initial ideas about her preferred future be challenged, broadened, deepened, and strengthened somehow. If this is not done, then the initial ideas about the future are almost certainly going to be only the projected fears or hopes of the past or present. They may not have much relevance for the future. Without some consideration of the major forces creating the environment of tomorrow, and of truly alternative, holistic responses to them, any plan or call for action, no matter how clearly stated and broadly supported, is likely to lead to failure and disappointment. A person's preferred future is more likely to be viable after her sense of what is likely and possible has been challenged and expanded.

Indeed, I would say that it is because most citizen action groups fail to survey alternative futures and to develop their own preferred future in a response to those alternatives that citizen groups frequently fail to achieve their preferred futures; or, if achieving them, still find themselves unhappy and overpowered. Given the dynamic and unprecedented nature of the ongoing future, any action taken without attempting first to assess and anticipate the dynamism will fail, even when it succeeds!

Probably the best current example of this is the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It is not enough to desire, and work hard to obtain, the end of something. It is also necessary to envision, and work hard to invent, the creation of something viable in its place; something which is sustainable in the future environment in which it actually finds itself.

I believe that alternative futures exercises, which owe so much to Jungk's future workshops, are another step forward in this direction.

[*] This article was originally prepared in response to an invitation to write something for inclusion in a volume celebrating the 80th birthday of Robert Jungk. It was translated into German and appeared in Die Triebkraft Hoffnung, Robert Jungk zu Ehren. Mit einer ausführlichen Bibliographie seiner Veröffentlichungen, Published by Beltz Verlag of Vienna and Basel, 1993. It has also been published in English in the Future Research Quarterly, Fall 1993.