



## Guiding foresight into the future

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### ABSTRACT

The piece highlights the methodological contributions that Richard Slaughter has made to FS/Foresight. It organizes these contributions into four distinct roles: chronicler, critic, innovator, and champion. Richard had the remarkable ability to take up a new role as felt it was needed. His work made a significant and lasting contribution to developing the methodological capacity of futurists and the field to serve his purpose of promoting the development of high-quality foresight work.

Every field has its chroniclers, critics, innovators, and champions. It is unusual, however, for these roles being incorporated in one person. Richard Slaughter has played each of these roles for Futures Studies (FS)/Foresight. This piece focuses on his roles regarding methodology.

As a chronicler, Richard frequently asked the question about what we know as a field. Early in his career, he took up the important work of codifying the key ideas of futurists. In the pre-web world, the knowledge dispersed across individuals and institutions globally. It was no easy task to bring it together.

As a relatively young field, so many practitioners were immersed in the daily grind of fighting for respectability earning a living that they did not have the time or inclination to take a reflective on stance on what they are doing or where the field was going. Richard took up the task and periodically checks in and updates his reporting on the state of its development.

As a critic, he consistently raised questions about the overall purpose of foresight work. To what ends were the emerging methodologies aimed? When his chronicling found a gap, he highlighted it. And if work came up short, his critic streak pointed it out. This role is sometime uncomfortable and not one that people will flock too. It is difficult to publicly challenge the work of one's colleagues. But someone has to do it for a field to develop in a healthy fashion.

As an innovator, he is not content to merely observe and report when a gap or opportunity presented itself. If his critique is not enough to spur action, he took it upon himself to innovate. Richard did not stay above the fray in the critic's chair but entered the fray when needed. He made many significant contributions to the practice of foresight, highlighted by launching the critical and integral perspectives.

As a champion, he brought the roles together as a guide and mentor for so many practitioners – myself included. Not only his students, but students and practitioners across the globe benefitted from his work. He has been a consistent advocate for futurist and for the field.

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## 1. Chronicler

Practitioners need to know “what’s out there?” Who is doing good work? Trying new things? What new methods might we bring into our practice? Richard adopted that role and consistently reported on the development of the field and provided a panoramic view of the state of FS/Foresight including its methodology.

My first encounter with one of his methodological overviews was “Looking for the Real ‘Megatrend’” (Slaughter, 1993b). This piece reviewed, critiqued, and categorized several prominent studies, including one by my boss at the time Joe Coates. The works were reviewed in a tough yet fair way. I felt he thoughtfully and accurately characterized work done by our firm. As a young professional it was fascinating to see the various approaches to futures work organized and situated in a useful and accessible way. I am still using this simple framework of today that grouped futures work into what Richard regarded as progressively more sophisticated approaches:

- 1 *Pop futurism*
- 2 *Problem-oriented*
- 3 *Critical*
- 4 *Epistemological*

Several years later he re-examined the field with “Professional Standards in Futures Work” (Slaughter, 1999a). In this work, he particularly emphasized the need for quality: “Quality is perhaps more essential in FS than in many other fields. Since the subject of the field (i.e. ‘the future’) is problematic, it follows that futures work should be carried out according to the most rigorous professional standards. This amounts to a reversal of the popular view of FS as ‘flaky’, ‘speculative’ activity that is often dismissively associated with crystal ball gazing.” This was spot-on for me the time. I was writing about “stealth futures” as a strategy for working around the generally poor perception of futures work at the time (Hines, 2003a).

A decade later in 2009, he produced an even-deeper analysis of the state of FS/Foresight and its methodology with “The State of Play in the Futures Field (SOPIFF)” (Slaughter, 2009). This massive study introduced a metascanning methodology in its own right in cataloguing the field in six categories: organizational type, social interests, methods, domains, capacity building, and country/location. In terms of methodology, he introduced categorization of methods in order from most to least frequent application (number of applications in parentheses). As always, the approach to categorization provided fresh insights, in this case the introduction of integral methods.

- 1 systemic methods (167); includes systems analysis and scenario building
- 2 linear methods (158); various kinds of trend analysis, forecasting and extrapolations
- 3 critical methods (66); dealing with cultural construction and understanding
- 4 integral methods (20); a “new” category that he nudged the field to develop further

It is difficult to suggest a crowning achievement in a career with such range and depth. Perhaps the closest candidate is the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies (KBFS), his ongoing compilation tracking key works in foresight over time. The KBFS arose from ideas and conversations in various locations around the world during the early 1990s. It addressed the concern that the as the field expanded and diversified it was increasingly difficult to identify and evaluate its core features such as organizations, methods, and literature.

The first incarnation was as a special issue of *Futures* (Slaughter, 1993a). Three years later this work was expanded into a three-volume set of hardcopy books that was launched in Washington, DC at a World Future Society (WFS) event. The work was updated a decade later in the convenient form of a CD-ROM as the 2005 Professional Edition. The intro to this volume elegantly summarized not only the rationale for the KBFS, but for me, Richard’s work as a whole. “FS needs to refine and develop its knowledge base as the process of discipline-building,” and “can contribute significantly to dealing with the civilizational challenges we are facing” (Slaughter, 2005).

For the most recent third edition, the KBFS 2020 (Slaughter & Hines, 2020), thirty-one articles were selected and edited to represent the best work in the field. They are organized into (1) foundations, (2) methods and practices (3) synergies, case studies and implementation, and (4) directions and outlooks. The Association of Professional Futurists (APF) published the work and offers it as a gift for members and for sale to the public.

This collaboration gave me especially keen insight into how Richard thinks about what represents work that ought to be highlighted as representative of the best work in the field. We developed the following selection criteria:

- Does the article represent an important innovation or change in the field?
- How new and fresh is the material?
- Is it of exceptional quality?
- Does it introduce new voices, including emerging futurists?

The list reiterates recurrent themes of quality and innovation, but of special note is the emphasis on “new voices” in the field. Perhaps this fits best with his champion role, but also in chronicling the development of the field and its methodology, it has been particularly important to Richard to identify, highlight and encourage the voice and role of emerging futurists.

## 2. Critic

Why are we doing what we are doing? A key emphasis of Richard’s work is to question what ends our methodological means are serving. The title, “Towards responsible dissent and the rise of transformational futures,” (Slaughter, 1999b) captures the essence of his motivation in the critic role. He sees FS/Foresight as playing a key role in the future of humanity. Therefore, it is important that the futurist house be in proper order. He aptly points out that the study of the future is not value-free or interest-free: “Futures studies (FS) plays an ambiguous role because it is used both in ideologically regressive and progressive ways.” Thus, “the need for dissenting futures arises from such considerations.” He was often quite critical of Western approaches in general and American futures in particular.

“The Role of Critique in Futures Work” (Slaughter, 2002) highlighted his ongoing critiques of concepts such as megatrends, future shock, and the long boom scenario; of institutions such as the Millennium Project; and of publications such as Future Survey. Critique will occasionally ruffle feathers. And it did in Richard’s. But it often led to a productive outcome of stimulating debate about the works in contention. This particular piece, which was published in the WFSF Bulletin, generated a rebuttal from my colleague Peter Bishop in the next issue. I still use this back-and-forth exchange with my students to highlight historical differences within the field. Richard’s critiques challenged the US and the West to examine the assumptions and purposes of their work. A few years later, his special issue on “Integral Futures” (Slaughter, Hayward, & Voros, 2008) ruffled enough feathers to produce an entire rebuttal issue, “Epistemological Pluralism in Futures,” (Inayatullah, 2010) two years later! I noted in my own piece chronicling the evolution of Integral Futures that this controversy was a healthy sign that the field was [finally] actively engaging with Integral Futures (Hines & Collins, 2010).

One of my favorite contributions from The SOPIFF was his very useful framework on three interests that foresight can serve: pragmatic, progressive, and civilizational. While it was just one component of the research, it struck me as valuable and I still use it today. He noted that “relatively little attention has been paid to their [social interests] influence in FS/foresight work thus far” (Slaughter, 2009, 10) (Fig. 1).

## 3. Innovator

Sometimes it is not enough to chronicle and critique. When the field does not “fill the gaps” or “seize the opportunities,” Richard was willing and able to step in and take the lead. Perhaps we should start with his role in launching the critical futures study with his PhD dissertation on critical futures education (Slaughter, 1982). Ramos, in describing Richard’s work in spawning critical futures, put the motivation for the work bluntly: “as a response to the crisis that has come to face human civilization during the 20th century” (Ramos, 2003, 1). The introduction of the critical perspective to the field in spawned foresight methodologies, such as now-popular Causal Layered Analysis (CLA).

I saw his layers before CLA in *Probing Beneath the Surface: Review of a Decade’s Futures Work* (Slaughter, 1989). It included a graphic depiction suggesting the need to consider the physical superstructure and underlying frameworks and the supporting foundation; alongside that was the social structures and the underlying and the underlying structure such as culture norms and the supporting worldviews. The importance of thinking in layers was highlighted by two key points:

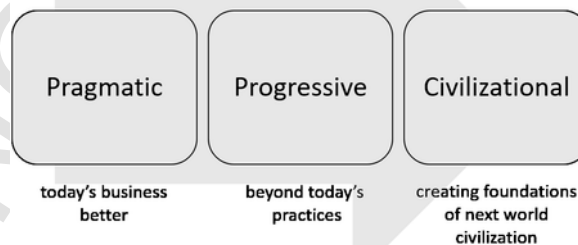


Fig. 1. Summarizes the three interests. He classified several hundred foresight works globally according to which of the three interests it served. Perhaps it was no surprise that most work in the pragmatic category, followed by progressive, and the least amount of work being civilizational. A key objective of his futures work is to encourage more progressive and ideally more civilizational foresight work.

- the importance of changes or transformations in meaning, and
- in understanding the economic and social interests involved in exploring a particular issue or future.

These points are at the heart of the critical futures tradition.

“Futures Studies: From Individual to Social Capacity” (Slaughter, 1996) introduced yet another useful framework. He suggested that a different strategy was need for FS/Foresight work, one that recognizes the layered quality of futures understanding. He acknowledged that this could approach could not be legislated into existence. Rather, the emphasis on deeper work could be gradually built up layer-by-layer over time. The five layers are:

- Level 5: Social capacity for long-term foresight
- Level 4: Futures processes and projects
- Level 3: Futures tools & methodologies
- Level 2: Futures concepts
- Level 1: Raw capacities and unreflective use perceptions

Years later, he similarly developed integral futures in response to a perceived need for a new type of thinking and methodological approach. “Beyond the Mundane: Reconciling breadth and depth in Futures enquiry” (Slaughter, 2006) opened with an exhortation to develop methods that go beyond the dominant empirical tradition. In this work, he really brings home the point about humanity’s over-emphasis on exteriors (behaviors, systems, and structures), and the need to develop interior (values, worldviews, and culture). He brought this emphasis on interior development to his futures students. I in turn applied this emphasis in a new class I was developing, *Alternative Perspectives on the Future*. We spent time in the beginning of the course in developing awareness of the students’ personal development as well as their audience. It is a point we now emphasize throughout our curriculum at the Houston Foresight program.

A second significant methodological innovation contribution was development and introduction of Integral Futures. While this topic is being covered elsewhere in this special issue, I think a few words are necessary here. The seminal piece for me was “Transcending flatland: Implications of Ken Wilber’s meta-narrative for Futures Studies” (Slaughter, 1998). This launched my personal journal into all things Integral, which included a not insignificant foray into the works of integral philosopher Ken Wilber. The immediate methodological implication was the need to re-examine my/our approach to scanning. For the next few years I played with ideas of how to “integralize” my scanning and ended up publishing a piece on it – thus officially joining the team so-to-speak (Hines, 2003b).

In Richard’s typical fashion, the Flatland piece pulled no punches with this opening line: “The dominant futures project in the West is essentially an expression of a late-modern outlook founded on notions of prediction, forecasting and control.....the framing of futures studies has occurred out of a broadly reductionist framework - what Wilber calls ‘flatland’ (Slaughter, 1998, 519). Again we have the notion of layers and looking the surface and beyond the obvious. He goes on to point out the need for a FS/Foresight to have a wider, richer view, which he suggests the Integral approach can provide. It was my first exposure to the four quadrant integral matrix. I realized that my work was imbalanced toward the right-hand side of measurable behaviors and systems at the expense of the left-hand interior world of culture and values. In a bit of synchronicity, I had just been asked by an internal client at Kellogg’s, where I was an organizational futurist, to look at changes in consumer values. This launched me into an exploration of values and worldviews that eventually led to me publishing a book on future of values (Hines, 2011). It was a major shift in how I did my futures work.

#### 4. Champion

I will take a personal angle in highlighting his role as a champion in the methodology arena, as I was just one of many young futurists who were influenced by Richard. Our first face-to-face collaboration was an invitation from Richard for me to visit the Foresight Master’s program at Swinburne in 2001. At the time, I was working as an organizational futurist at Dow Chemical and was deep into grappling with the pragmatic questions implementation of foresight. He saw value in bringing a pragmatic guy to share with his students to help balance the progressive and civilizational orientation of his Master’s program. This visit was the first of many collaborations. The next was a session on Integral Futures at a World Future Society General Assembly the following year. It symbolized the how different approaches to future work could find common ground. A few years later, I still recall the smile on Richard’s face when he came to his first APF “cocktail party” as he shared how pleased he was to see the positive energy and the fun emanating from the group.

Richard’s work appears throughout our curriculum at the Houston Foresight Master’s program. I am hard-pressed to think of anyone who has done more to challenge my own thinking about the proper role of FS/Foresight, and in that regard he has been an influence on all the students who have gone through our program in recent years. Just last year, for instance, we launched a “State of Foresight” initiative that was directly influenced by the State of Play in the Futures Field project of 2009.

Our most recent collaboration on the KBFS 2020 update reminded me how we are something of an odd couple. As noted above, Richard is drawn to civilizational foresight and I am on the pragmatic/progressive end of the spectrum. To his great credit, he asked me to be a co-editor as a way to help ensure that that pragmatic/progressive work was adequately represented. Our views on

whether to include certain pieces did indeed clash at times, but we worked it through thoughtfully and respectfully, and I think we produced a collection that was representative of the breadth and depth of the field.

I am grateful for all he has done to further my own career and to help steer the methodology of FS/Foresight in a fruitful direction.

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