

Governing the Future

Integrating Futures Studies and Policy Studies for 21st Century Higher Education

by Amy L Fletcher Ph.D.

Futures Studies as a contemporary discipline began in the Cold War (1945 – 1989). First-generation futurists such as Herman Kahn, then at the RAND Corporation, were preoccupied with potential catastrophic scenarios relating to the possibility of global thermonuclear war. By the 1970s, futurism took another turn in the spotlight as a consequence of the energy crisis and the broader political and economic turmoil of the era. Companies such as the Shell Corporation, as well as national governments ranging from Finland to New Zealand to the United States, either integrated foresight and futures methods into organizational processes or created stand-alone research units or agencies tasked with systematically ‘standing in the future.’

Today, foresight and futures studies are again taking centre-stage in a variety of organizational, national and global contexts, as corporations, communities and governments seek to navigate existential challenges such as the

biodiversity crisis, climate change, globalization, rising insecurity, and terrorism. The variable of disruptive technological change – in which advanced digital, bio and cognitive technologies create new products, upend traditional markets, and generate both new opportunities and threats for human well-being – is also a major influence on the search for consultative and robust methods for considering the medium to long-term future. Though policy studies and futures studies would seem inextricably linked in this search for sustainable real-world futures, the two disciplines have mostly advanced on parallel tracks. It is often the case that futures studies enthusiasts in the social sciences have to repeatedly explain what futures studies is or fight the ingrained social scientific ethos that while rigorous explanation is possible, prospective analysis is not. A notable exception is the Hawaii Center for Futures Studies, located in the Department of Political Science at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

Ergo, I would like to assert that a conscious effort to bring together the best of policy studies and futures studies could produce multiple advantages to both scholars and practitioners. It would also enable better expert advice to real-world policy-makers and much more effective community consultation. This will likely require more effort and professional risk initially from the futures studies side of the relationship, insofar as policy studies and political science are far more established scholarly disciplines and thoroughly integrated in the Academy—though economists may not always agree. One key early step would be to do a thorough stock-take of the linkages that already exist, in terms of initiatives, programmes and the published literature. I will be embarking

on such a systematic overview in the second half of 2019 and invite potentially interested parties to contact me to discuss ways of sharing and publicizing this work. Beyond this, some brave souls may want to find openings in professional annual meetings, such as those sponsored by the American Political Science Association or the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, wherein futures-oriented policy topics – particularly those that deploy either quantitative or quite robust qualitative methods – could find a sympathetic panel. Alternatively, it may be that we need to reinforce our own networks in order to explore full panel proposals.

Finally, the specific use of foresight tools as a form of experiential teaching holds great promise for both policy studies and futures studies. I have the privilege of teaching an Introduction to public policy course (undergraduate), a course on science, technology, and health (upper-division), and a postgraduate course on science, technology and environmental policy at the University of Canterbury. Over the last three years, I have used an in-class scenario exercise in each of these to provide students with background in the concepts, theory and practice of community consultation. This started quite modestly, but is now worth up to 20 percent of the grade. The exercise requires the students to agree on a topic and timeframe, jointly prepare a briefing book of basic background facts, and then divide into four teams to go through a scenario-building process based on the two key drivers that the class prioritized. I report back at a subsequent class on the major conclusions reached and on how the students might then use public policy tools to maximize the chances of reaching the preferred future.



As someone who is quite comfortable with the “sage on the stage” approach to teaching, moving to more experiential learning required me to move outside of my comfort zone and to become willing to risk the unpredictability of consultative methods. More importantly, the results for students seem clear: each time I have used this method, many students have commented (specifically in evaluations) that the opportunity to consider the future and to learn an actual method for policy-making and analysis was among the most valuable aspects of the course. In addition, several students have voluntarily emailed me afterwards to note that being conversant with the methods and concepts of foresight and futures studies helped them to succeed in the interview process for professional policy advisor jobs.

Peter Bishop’s Teach the Future initiative (<http://www.teachthefuture.org>) is a brilliant resource and provides multiple examples of how engaging with the future can enhance the social science and policy classroom. Even so, there is ample room for new and collaborative initiatives in this area. This is particularly so for initiatives that deploy digital technologies in innovative ways to enable relatively inexpensive and accessible cross-national and cross-regional policy futures teaching collaborations. In addition, with the recent emergence of the Society for Decision-Making under Extreme Uncertainty (DMDU) and emerging scholarship published on anticipatory governance (see, for example, Jonathan Boston or David Guston), this is an auspicious time to reclaim the good work that has already been done. We can leverage such initiatives to reinvigorate the policy studies/futures studies relationship.

Boston, Jonathan (2017) *Safeguarding the Future: Governing in an Uncertain World*. Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books.

Guston, David (2013) “Understanding ‘Anticipatory Governance.’” *Social Studies of Science* 44(2): 218 – 242.

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