ICED 2020 proceedings:

Possible, probable and preferable futures of university teaching, and how to explore them as academic developers

Florence Dujardin[1], Phil Long[2]

Centre for Staff and Educational Development,
University of East Anglia Higher Education
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom

Abstract

Understanding the pedagogical uses of technology is a key requirement for many academic developers. To explore lecturers' perceptions, aspirations and concerns in this area, we used the Ethnographic Futures Research (EFR) approach, a little-used method in academic development research. The paper first introduces this approach to exploring socio-technical scenarios for the future; it then summarises our experiences in a small research project before making the case for using this method to support academic development activities.

1 Introduction

Calls for educators to include anticipatory skills in the curriculum are long-standing, to enable young people to address critical issues such as inequality and climate change and to foster step changes in the way we view the future (Facer, 2016; Priyadharshini, 2020). As the covid crisis is compelling society to make swift adaptations, these calls have taken on a new urgency. As academic developers, we need to offer training events that enhance lecturers' "future literacy", that is, their ability to explore alternative futures and act accordingly (Miller, 2015) using the affordances and debates shaping their disciplines. The goal is to encourage them to nurture in students the mindsets and skills required to navigate social and environmental change and to view it as space for innovation (Dator, 2014).

We had intended to provide such an event at the ICED 2020 conference, to support delegates' exploration of possible futures for academic development. Instead, this paper shares and reflects on our experiences of using a futures research method, in the hope that readers will adapt it for their own purposes. We chose "digital practice" as the focal domain because of current pressures for lecturers to teach online. The paper first outlines the method, before offering practical guidance. It closes with an evaluation of futures approaches for academic development practice and research.

2 What is futures research?

Education is sometimes viewed as a means of replicating social order, but its very nature is to encourage learners to forge different paths for themselves. It is an "interventive co-creator of futures" rather than a kind of insurance or "corrective" for uncertain futures (Facer, 2016). Conversely, digital technology is often perceived as a herald of change when in fact it can reify social practices. What makes different socio-technical futures possible are human agency and vigilance when faced with increasingly "intelligent" technologies (Aagaard & Lund, 2019). Futures research methods are well adapted for freeing our imagination and uncovering and evaluating alternative versions of the future with a view to promoting action (Dator, 2002).

---

[1] f.dujardin@uea.ac.uk
[2] p.long@uea.ac.uk

The Ethnographic Futures Research (EFR) approach to interviewing is an interactive, non-directive method for eliciting participants' visions for the future in relation to a specific theme and its possible evolution within their organisations or society (e.g. Lowdon, 2010; Veselsky & Textor, 2007). The "ethnographic" element of the method stems from the situatedness of the participants' views. EFR interviewers do not research present cultural patterns. Instead, they ask:

> *Within the context of overall trends and possibilities as you perceive them, what potential changes in your sociocultural system do you (1) want, (2) fear, and (3) expect? (Veselsky & Textor 2007)*

EFR works on the basis that while the future does not exist, what does exist are our hopes and anxieties about our culture within a specific future horizon, as well as our preferences among alternative futures. Researchers elicit from interviewees their presently-held opinions about pessimistic, optimistic and probable futures, in order to develop contextualised scenarios. Gathering such varied and sometimes contradictory views is essential when planning action, as "stories we tell about the future are powerful resources for shaping our sense of possibilities and readying to fight for change" (Facer, 2011).

3   Conducting futures research interviews

EFR interviews are just one of the methods used to probe perceptions of the future. There are variations on the "interview" element of EFR. For example, Mitchell (2002) used it in conjunction with "élite interviewing" to explore civic leaders' views on the "digital divide". In higher education contexts, one of the authors of this paper used it to ask a small sample of lecturers in our university how they saw the future of their digital practice (Dujardin & Walker, 2016). This was done with an assumption of steady development; the kind of "feral future" brought about by crisis (Ramírez & Ravetz, 2011) and now unfolding in universities had not been factored in. Yet the project findings and an offshoot workshop were very useful in supporting the pivot to online teaching occasioned by the covid-19 crisis.

Dujardin and Walker (2016) used the following instructions for unstructured interviews in which participants were conceptualised as informants for their departmental settings:

> *During the interview, you'll explore three scenarios about what the future might bring. Consider your practice, your discipline, and any department and/or university factors, as well as your students' expectations.*
> 1. *An optimistic scenario – If you could get all the technology you would wish to support students, what would the future look like?*
> 2. *A pessimistic scenario – In a least favourable scenario, what would the future look like? What would impact your practice the most? What would hinder it?*
> 3. *An intermediate, realistic scenario that is most probable – What would your practice look like in this version of the future? What factors would affect it?*

Project findings and conclusions were amplified in a follow-up workshop in which, with some adaptions, EFR was used at larger scale. During our university's Learning and Teaching conference, Ms Dujardin asked 40 lecturers participating in a workshop to respond to the above instructions, using coloured "post-its" to articulate their optimistic, pessimistic and probable visions for digital practice (see Figure 1 below). Lecturers' contributions offered valuable ideas for reviewing a module on digital practice offered on our Master's in Higher Education Practice.
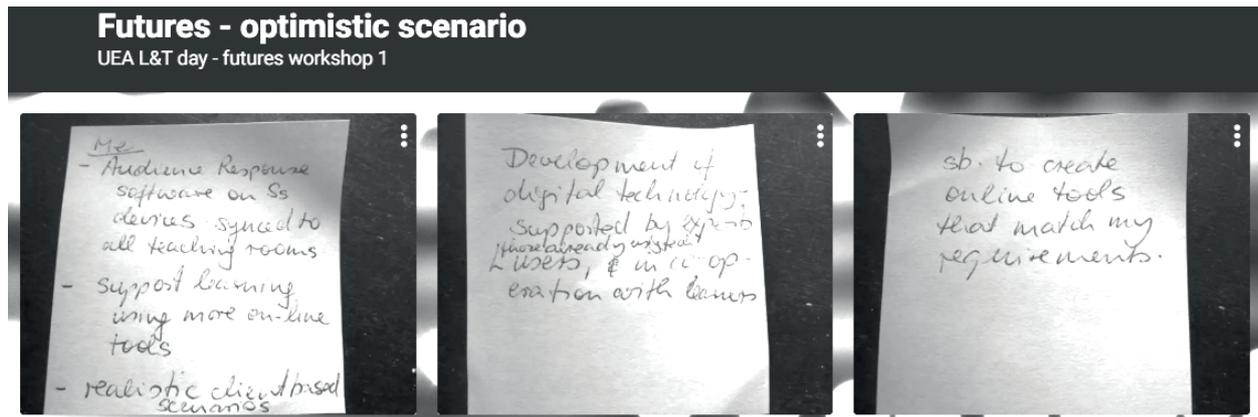
Figure 1: Example imaginings of optimistic futures in digital practice

Using EFR requires skills in facilitating unstructured interviews and workshops. Perhaps the most unsettling aspect when first using this method is to engage not with facts but with perceptions of something that does not exist – the future. Yet participants responded well and provided rich data; they also reported having fun – an emotion not normally associated with interviews or focus groups. Using EFR also offered an inclusive approach to capturing participants' trajectories in digital practice within their disciplines.

4   Why use EFR?

EFR is associated with conventional ethnography, and therefore shares similar limitations and benefits. For academic developers, it can also create ethical tensions because participants express their values as well as their perceptions of the institution they work for; care must therefore be taken when reporting participants' scenarios or acting upon them. We recognise these issues, but also wish to highlight the potential of futures research. Its purpose is to maintain or enhance people's well-being and sense of agency, so futurists seek to understand trends and what can be changed, accelerated or prevented through individual or collective action (Bell, 2017: 111). Academic developers share similar goals: to make teaching and learning productive, they need to pay attention to trends and factors in order to devise training and other initiatives that support transitions and enhance individual and institutional practices. Having appropriate tools is necessary to identify issues early and to involve lecturers in identifying priorities and solutions. Futures research therefore has a place among the techniques that academic developers can use. Working with individuals or groups yielded insights that may not be easily accessible with more conventional research methods such as surveys.

In addition to providing a novel way of uncovering lecturers' learning needs, futures research offers another benefit. Eliciting stories challenges the assumption of a single inevitable future, which can help participants to prepare themselves better for changes to come and motivate them to influence events. This sense of preparedness gained through exploration of coherent alternatives has been called "future literacy" (Miller, 2015). Our 2016 study initiated discussions around the skills that students need as digital citizens in an increasingly complex world. Such conservations perhaps lacked urgency then, but this has changed: the covid-19 pandemic has "unlocked" many problems, including the need to develop anticipatory skills to address crises and the value of digital skills in the new futures of work (Blanc, 2020). Exploring alternative stories for the future, evaluating the factors and values that underpin them, and developing action plans are valuable not only for academic development but also within all academic disciplines.

5   Conclusions

Though used in higher education research, futures research is under-explored in the academic development literature. Our pilot study (Dujardin and Walker, 2016) outlined its potential and is now being expanded to review our support provision to enhance lecturers' digital literacies. The unprecedented pivot to online teaching in spring 2020 created challenges for campus-based universities. It represented what futurists call a "trend-break" (Blanc, 2020) during which online teaching became acceptable and necessary. There is much work to do to understand lecturers' perceptions around this mode of working and their priorities for the years to come (Vlachopoulos, 2020). Futures research provides a novel and participative way of carrying out such needs analyses and planning professional development initiatives – some of which will need to address "future literacy" to enhance resilience among academics and students.

References

Aagaard, T., & Lund, A. (2019). *Digital Agency in Higher Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning*. Routledge.

Bell, W. (2017). *Foundations of Futures Studies: Volume 1: History, Purposes, and Knowledge* (2nd ed). Routledge.

Blanc, Y. (2020). Il n'y a plus d'après. Montée de l'incertitude et vigilance prospective. *Futuribles*, *437*(4), 61-69.

Dator, J. A. (Ed.). (2002). *Advancing Futures: Futures Studies in Higher Education*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Dator, J. A. (2014). "New beginnings" within a new normal for the four futures. *Foresight*, *16*(6), 496–511. https://doi.org/10.1108/FS-09-2013-0046

Dujardin, A.-F., & Walker, R. (2016). *SEDA Report: Academic Learning Needs and Educational Technologies at UEA – An Ethnographic Futures Research Project*. Staff and Education Development Association. http://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/Dujardin_final_rpt.pdf

Facer, K. (2011). *Learning Futures: Education, Technology and Social Change*. Routledge.

Facer, K. (2016). Using the future in education: Creating space for openness, hope and novelty. In H. E. Lees & N. Noddings (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Alternative Education* (pp. 63-78). Palgrave Macmillan.

Lowdon, M. (2010). Ethnographic futures research: The future of Jesuit higher education in the United States. *World Futures Review*, *2*(4), 19-25. https://doi.org/10.1177/194675671000200404

Miller, R. (2015). Learning, the future, and complexity. An essay on the emergence of futures literacy. *European Journal of Education*, *50*(4), 513-523. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12157

Mitchell, M. M. (2002). Exploring the future of the digital divide through ethnographic futures research. *First Monday*, *7*(11). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v7i11.1004

Priyadharshini, E. (2020). Re-imagining futures, education and learning relations. *Humanistic Futures of Learning: Perspectives from UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks*, 185-189.

Ramírez, R., & Ravetz, J. (2011). Feral futures: Zen and aesthetics. *Futures*, *43*(4), 478-487. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2010.12.005

Veselsky, E. E., & Textor, R. B. (2007). The future of Austria: A twenty-year dialog. *Futures Research Quarterly*, *23*(4), 23-56.

Vlachopoulos, D. (2020). COVID-19: Threat or opportunity for online education? *Higher Learning Research Communications*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v10i1.1179