

Experiential Futures in Transdisciplinary Higher Education: Feeling Futures and Making them Worth our Wants

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Keywords: matters of care, transdisciplinarity, higher education, affect, experiential futures

Key Thematic Question: Feeling the future?

Type of Contribution: Paper (1 000 words)

Recent advances in emerging technology, alongside social and environmental changes such as climate change, platform capitalism, the gig economy, and post-factual politics are heralding in what many refer to as the fourth industrial revolution. These shifts all present both challenges and opportunities and raise questions of distributed social and environmental impacts. How can we ensure collective flourishing with technology? How might we take action in the present to generate futures that enable many to flourish, rather than a select few? What futures are worth wanting? Specifically, what artful modes of anticipating and attuning to possibilities can be cultivated within higher education? How might learners sense alternative futures—feel, taste, touch and smell them—to address disempowering dichotomies and bias embedded within contemporary emerging technologies? What transdisciplinary methodologies and practices might make material participation in shaping just alternative futures possible?

The aim of this paper is twofold: to discuss lessons learned from incorporating affective “experiential futures” methods into a transdisciplinary undergraduate degree to enhance futures literacy and engagement (Candy 2010; Kuzmanovic & Gaffney 2017), and to extend scholarship on experiential futures approaches through notions of “matters of care” and affect from feminist science studies (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 90) describes care as “an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation.” We draw on this theorising to extend existing experiential futures approaches, with a particular focus on their ability to elicit non-normative ethical responses through the affective dimension. Experiential futures can be described as “an attempt to bring the worlds of tomorrow into the present in a way that can be experienced directly” (Kuzmanovic & Gaffney 2017, 110). Through a greater emphasis on the potential of performative, embodied, material, and immersive forms of engagement, experiential futures extend and trouble dominant futures approaches which have historically favoured discursive and/or statistical modes of engagement (Candy 2010; Candy & Dunagan 2016; Candy & Kornet 2019; Kuzmanovic & Gaffney 2017). This emphasis on materiality intersects with trends in design studies—particularly the growth of speculative design and design fiction (Dunne & Raby 2013; Durfee & Zeiger 2017)—and “a broader trend towards future-oriented deliberation that goes ‘beyond discourse’” in other fields (Davies et al. 2015, 76). Such experiential approaches seek to enable us to move away from discursive abstractions about the future to considering tangible actions, actors, objects and ethics in our anticipatory practices by engaging with a wider array of ways of sensing and ways of knowing (Pelzer & Versteeg 2019; Rijkens–Klomp, Baerten, & Rossi 2017).

To develop the argument, this paper discusses experiential futures approaches used within a transdisciplinary undergraduate degree—the Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and Innovation—at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. The specific focus is on a fourth-year subject, titled *Envisioning Futures*, which engages students in a future-oriented exploration of complex real-world challenges posed by diverse industry and community partners, as well as a thematic on the future of work. As part of assessment, students create a simulation of a lived experience in a future world,

which enables them to consider the desirability of such futures from the various stakeholders' perspectives. Employing a participatory action research methodology involving cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, we analyse and discuss the subject, including changes made, and what we have learnt over the three years the subject has run. We also analyse student's material artefacts—experiential scenarios of possible futures—to highlight the promise held by affective practices of anticipation. In particular, we discuss the role of prehearsals, sensory workshops, and performative narrative structures (such as the hero's journey and its limitations for complexity stories) in developing futures literacy, embodied ways of knowing, and careful affective practices, including ethico-political obligations. The paper draws out how these approaches intersect and contrast with other more widely used foresight approaches, such as scenario planning, casual layered analysis and integral theory (Slaughter 1996; Voros 2008).

Experiential futures approaches employed in this subject allow us (staff and students) to take a highly textured approach and experiment with ideas and alternative futures in order to “try them out,” consider the soft impacts and human consequences and generate insights that “sheds light on what is at stake and reveal avenues for intervention and innovation” (Slaughter 1996, 150). Puig de la Bellacasa's (2011, 2017) notion of matters of care helps to highlight tensions and opportunities that can arise through engaging with non-normative ethics in the context of transdisciplinary teaching and learning. We conclude with a reflection on the compromises and possibilities of care-full material engagement while performing anticipation.