

Learnings From Futures Studies: Learnings From Dator

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Abstract

This article explores life learnings from James Dator. These include conceptual, theoretical, pedagogical and praxis learnings. Key conceptual learnings include Futures Studies as focused on more than one future and as disruptive through the methodology of emerging issues analysis. Dator's pedagogical approach is examined as being open and embracing multiple perspectives. Finally, Dator's approach to praxis is considered as hypothesis based.

Keywords: Futures Studies, Alternative Futures, Poststructuralism, Macrohistory, James Dator, University of Hawaii, Emerging Issues Analysis.

Framework

This article takes a multi-fold approach to analysing the contributions of Jim Dator to the study of the future. This should not be surprising given Dator's insistence in constituting the future from multiple perspectives and to - even when there are political pressures to close the future - keep them open, that is, as Nandy (1996) has written, to keep open the plurality of dissent.

The article begins with the personal wherein I narrate my encounters with Dator. This is done to face subjectivity, to acknowledge that my analysis of Dator's text are done through the personal, even as I attempt to engage in objective analysis. While not losing sight of the story, I move to Dator's foundational conceptual framework. Two points are critical. First is the notion of alternative futures and second is the concept of disrupting business-as-usual so that alternative futures can be imagined and created. Scenarios are examples of the first and emerging issues analysis of the second.

The conceptual framework is based on a broader theorizing of the future. The future, for Dator, must be understood historically. There are patterns of change that shape the future. Understanding these patterns leads to greater insight into social, economic and political reality.

However, the patterns of the past do not predict the future. Dator is not a positivist. For him, the future is best seen as an asset, as a way to create a more robust and anticipatory democracy, and not as a tool to better predict market trends. Insofar as the future is not yet real, the future as an image can be studied, analysed and used to better understand individuals and groups. And - this is critical - the future is not neutral but rather colonized. Futures studies in effect is a vessel through which the future can be decolonized, in which dominant images can be challenged, and alternative images created. In the struggle of structure – the patterns of the past – with agency, the possibility of human influence, while acknowledging structure, Dator focuses on the possibility of transformation, of the creation of desired futures. To do this, sensitivity to practice and pedagogy is foundational. Futures studies, for Dator, while being theoretically rigorous needs to be relevant, based on authentic participation with stakeholders, be they clients, colleagues, respondents or students. The article concludes by locating Dator himself as an emerging issue, a disruptor.

You Have to Meet This Guy!

In early 1976, the second semester of my undergraduate life at the University of Hawai'i, my roommate stormed into our shared dormitory room and said that I had to – it was a must – take a course from this guy, James Dator. He described him as a hippie professor brimming with enthusiasm for creating a different world. We were idealistic, young, and looking for mentors who could help us be and think different.

Later that year, in my first semester as a sophomore I enrolled in “Introduction to Futuristics.” The class was held in the bottom of Sinclair Library, a sort of a basement. What I remember from that class – now, 37 years later – was Dator’s emphasis on multi-disciplinary approaches to knowledge, his ability to teach through stories, his focus on Marshal McLuhan (196) (“we shape our tools; thereafter they shape us”) and his exhorting us to determine and design our desired image of the future. And, even then, or especially then, he took positions counter to mainstream wisdom. Most Honolulu residents at that time saw Waikiki as a crass tourist trap, unwilling to live there or even to admit that they visited Waikiki. Dator, however, declared his love for Waikiki, though insisted he wished that the skyline was less monotonous. This was heresy. On campus, the focus was on green politics – a return to simplicity and spirituality. Dator instead spoke on the virtues of transformative technologies – artificial intelligence, space travel and recombinant DNA. Dator modelled the behaviour of a good futurist: challenge, disrupt and innovate.

Inspired by this introductory class, I took whatever else Dator taught and when I graduated in 1979 with a BA in Liberal Studies (a make-your-own-major approach, in which mine was spirituality and social change) I applied for admission in the Masters Program in Political Science with a focus on Alternative Futures. There I met Chris Jones and Wendy Schultz (in the “Politics of the Future” course), now leading futurists, as well as others who have remained sympathetic to Futures Studies, such as Deacon Ritterbusch and Richard Scarce, and those who championed the field, such as Ramli Mohammed.

Dator was not just a thought leader, he was practical. After the first year and a half of course work, students engaged in internships. Chris Jones went to the Institute of Alternative Futures, while Wayne Yasutomi and I joined the Hawai'i Judiciary. Dator had earlier convinced the Director of the Courts, Lester Cingcade

to initiate a futures research program there (Dator, 1980). Interns engaged in quantitative research—futures of crimes, attorneys and most importantly the need for raising judicial salaries—and more qualitatively oriented emerging issues analysis. Judiciary interns, Dator, Cingcade, and a committee of Judiciary leaders met regularly to analyse emerging issues. These included developments in neuroscience and the implications for prisons; the rights of robots and the implications for the courts; alternative futures of attorneys; the rise of the Pacific Shift and its implication for the Hawai'i Law School; the possible collapse of the Hawai'i Judiciary; and the possibility of a Federal Constitutional Convention. We took these issues and developed them into full-fledged research papers, many of them later published in academic journals (e.g., Inayatullah, 1983/1984). During this time, we learned how to navigate within large organizations. We wrestled with issues such as, “what did the judicial leaders need?” “what worked and what did not?” “how could we get more traction for our unconventional research?” For Cingcade (2002), most significant was that middle and senior management were getting a glimpse of what the courts could be, and what would happen if they did not act (for example, the implications of increasing caseload on delay and thus legitimacy). As interns, we really did not know what we were doing. The courts were not sure what they wanted. For Dator, this was fine (as I mention below): this was an experiment. We learned while doing.

Eventually, I came to coordinate the Courts Futures group, housed in the Office of Planning and Statistics, and through the efforts of Anna Wilson-Yue and Phil McNally, a newsletter of trends and emerging issues was developed. Originally called *Nou hou Kanawai*, it was eventually renamed *Justice Horizons*. I stayed there for a decade, with futures research efforts culminating in a *Judicial Horizons* conference where hundreds of lawyers, citizens, jurists, planners, and academics developed scenarios for the Hawai'i Judiciary, resulting in dozens of recommendations for positive change (Inayatullah, 1994). While the Judiciary futures program ended in the early 1990s, other American states were impressed: thirty-two eventually initiated judicial foresight commissions. Over time, other nations picked up on what was learned in Hawai'i and the USA, and developed their own judicial foresight programs and commissions (Singapore Subordinate Courts, and Victoria, Australia, are examples).

However, prior to leaving the Judiciary in 1987 a phone call from my father strongly suggesting that it was about time I did my PhD, led me to re-enrol in the doctorate program. I studied P.R Sarkar's theories of social and spiritual change, and their Indic epistemological roots, comparing them to Western, Islamic, Sinic, Gaian and feminist theories of history, and, of course, Dator, was my chair. Even while my thesis did not focus on the future per se, he was the best chair anyone could dream of: he left me alone, and used his considerable skills at mediation to rope in the other committee members. I passed the comprehensives and final thesis exam with “ease”, gaining my doctorate in 1990. What impressed me most was that he did what needed to be done. In this case, while knowledgeable of theories of change, as the content was more in the area of civilizational macrohistory, he left it to committee member Johan Galtung to ensure that I received the best possible advice (Galtung was teaching courses in macrohistory). The theoretical underpinnings of my doctoral thesis were framed by poststructuralism, advised by critical theorist Michael Shapiro. Dator overviewed the process, ensuring that everything ran smoothly.

After eighteen years in Hawai'i, I left for Australia. Since then I have met Dator many times at international futures conferences and in Honolulu, Hawai'i where I have returned for conferences he designed.

Over the years, I have noticed an ageless quality to him. And while not a contradiction per se, it is important to note: for someone who has focused on change, he, himself, has stayed stable – inspiring, gracious, wise, and, always focused on making the world a far better place, and with the same iconic haircut.

As one of the inventors of the academic study of the future (Bezold, 2009, Dator, 2002), there is great deal one can learn from Dator. I divide my lessons from Dator into four areas: (1) conceptual, (2) theoretical, (3) pedagogical, and (4) applied.

Conceptualizing the Future

Two conceptual principles from Dator have been foundational in my understanding of futures studies. These are the notion of alternative futures and disruption.

First, as Dator never tires of asserting: there is never one future; there are always alternative futures. I still viscerally remember Dator recounting the formation of the World Futures Studies Federation with the endless debates as to the nature of pluralism—can there be more than one future or are there alternative futures? While socialist futurists saw one future, those like Dator, argued for multiple futures, asserting that the future is meant to be an open space. The role of the futurist is, as much as possible, to challenge the official future and thereby create space for alternative futures. In the polity, this is to assist citizens in developing a flexible mind, a flexible approach to future reality, in a word: anticipatory democracy. While certainly scenarios are an aspect to this, as in corporate scenario planning, alternative futures thinking is a bit deeper. Scenarios can often be, though they do not have to be, strategic in their perspective, focused on articulating key uncertainties and using them to develop relevant futures. Dator's approach has been to ensure that we do not lose sight of outliers—the absurd, the disturbing and the ridiculous. Depth and breadth are crucial.

Thus: there is not one future, but many futures. I have been teaching this to my children, my students, the cities, the institutions and the hundreds of organizations I have worked with over the past three decades since moving from pure futures theory to futures practice. While an obvious concept, it is not always easy to understand. We want certainty, comfort, and we wish for the predictable linear trajectory. And yet, it is the “surprise”, the unsuspecting alternative that can be a great gift—though it does not often seem so at the time. The outlier can create emergence. Alternative futures methods are not merely better or more effective contingency planning, as in disaster relief (crucially important as climate change impacts the world), but in creating a conceptual framework where we are prepared for alternative futures and thus can act in novel ways. I am confident the staggering difference in disaster preparedness and management by the governments of Pakistan (massive flooding), USA (Hurricane Katrina), and Queensland (flooding) can be partly explained by the training and capacity development in alternative futures of many Queensland government leaders. The suffering was great but they were mentally prepared and could activate strategies to reduce the worst impacts.

The second pivotal principle is that of disruption, mapped through emerging

issues analysis (invented by Graham Molitor in the 1960s) (Molitor, 1977). The role of the futurist is to disrupt conventional ways of seeing the world. The futurist offers high-impact but possibly low-probability issues to policy and decision makers. These function to challenge conventional categories. Emerging issues may be predictive but more critically, they help us rethink how we norm the world. For example, the issue of the rights of robots accurately maps the rise of artificial intelligence but more importantly, it causes us to rethink the nature of rights. Are rights natural, god-given or politically derived, based on new forms of what counts as consciousness (McNally & Inayatullah, 1988)? Similarly, the emerging issue of “eating meat as child abuse” is disruptive not only in that it challenges the hegemony of meat as protein but the entire chemical, agro-industrial complex around meat. It also disrupts the boundary of who raises children: parents and the extended family, or dieticians and the nanny state?

It was Dator’s insistence that while the futurist needs to accommodate the views of all stakeholders, she also needs to conceptually challenge organizational sacred cows. This is not an easy role to play. At a recent EU-ASEAN meeting, one delegate became so incensed with the meat as child abuse issue, he started to physically poke me a number of times, arguing that his children were healthy. I explained to him that the purpose of the discussion is for him to think about disruptive events in his organization and not about the futures of food per se. I am confident that down the road the disruption process will be useful to his organization. My conclusion is that the method works. The challenge then is to ensure that after the disruption, participants map alternative futures, develop a desired future, and initiate action-learning strategies.

Disruption is not an end-goal in itself. Rather, by being open to disruption, adaptability to alternative futures is strengthened. Greater resilience is possible. And furthermore, the futurist is able to more effectively note further disruptions, and prepare organizations and institutions for dramatic change. I have noted in the past decade of foresight work for the Australian Government Department of Agriculture that now they are leading in identifying disruptors to industry, for example, with the creation of in-vitro meat (Donkin, 2013) or the 3D printing of meat (Maxey, 2013).

Theorizing the Future

While relevance is crucial, for futures studies to survive in the academy, it needed a theoretical foundation. For Dator, this meant countering the market trend and predictive orientation (but still including it) of much of populist soothsaying. Dator is fond of asserting that while the future itself cannot be predicted, images of the future can be studied, and trends and emerging issues explored. Moreover, behind these trends are macro theories of social change, be they technological (McLuhan, 1964), contradictions (Marx, 1975), or images of the future (Polak, 1973; Boulding, 1995). As theory, futures studies both informs other knowledge frames and is informed by them. Thus, the rise of critical futures studies approximates the rise of Foucauldian post-structural thinking throughout the world (Shapiro 1992).

Dator’s approach to theory is historical. Futures studies, he has argued ...is the last bastard child of positivism growing up in a postmodern age. It was conceived during the time people believed in a science (predictive and controlling) of the future. We know now that this is not possible (about anything,

certainly about the future!). So we are struggling to find out what futures studies is, given the fact that so many people still want to be able to predict and control the future. If futures studies can know nothing about the future, what use is it? (Inayatullah, 1993)

The utility argues Dator, is studying current images of the future “in order that we can come to know more about how our present ideas and actions towards the future influence the future” (Inayatullah, 1993). Drawing from post-structural interpretation of theory, the future can also be seen as an asset, as a resource that helps us rethink the present, thus making the present remarkable. As Dator writes: “Similarly, we are interested in using the future as a resource to solve present problems or to enable us to use the resources of the present more effectively and responsibly” (Inayatullah, 1993). In this view, futures studies has a critical dimension but also an instrumental purpose in linking ideals to institutional policymaking. But then is futures studies merely restricted to research and policymaking or is there a deeper transformative dimension to futures studies? Dator adds:

Finally, instead of predicting the future, futures studies helps people envision and invent the future not as though one were creating an inevitable blueprint, but in order to give a sense of direction and control (not the reality of such) on the assumption that soon after you start heading towards your preferred future, you will experience new things, develop new ideas, about a new preferred future, and want to discard the old one. The image of the preferred future which futures studies helps you create assumes almost demands such. (Inayatullah, 1993)

But insofar as some collectivities have a head start in researching and creating the future, Dator asserts that “decolonizing the future is an important part of futures studies, so questioning privileged futures and helping marginalized voices to speak and be heard is, and should always be, a central part of what Futures Studies is” (Inayatullah, 1993).

Dator was among the first to argue for the decolonization of the future (Dator, 1975/2005). This particular view—popular now, but radical then—was that developing societies should cease to follow the development model of the West; rather, they should leapfrog the West and create their own images of the good society. We now see practical evidence of this with many African communities skipping the landline phone technology and moving straight to the digital revolution (Manson, 2011; Perry, 2011). South Korean leadership as well, disheartened by the West’s inability to predict the global financial crisis, is now seeing a new vision of the future that is not based on catching up to the West, what Dator calls the “dream” society (Dator, 2009). Asian universities are developing their own visions of the future focused on the bottom billion, instead of seeking to be indexed through Western notions of research (Nasruddin, 2012; Inayatullah, 2013).

Islamic, Indic, Sinic and other civilizational approaches to the future also draw upon non-Western traditions, as the modern world seeks solutions to problems that cannot be resolved within the framework of the West. It is the sensitivity to theory that has allowed futures studies as a discipline to survive at the University of Hawai’i and spread to other universities such as Tamkang University in Taiwan and the University of the Sunshine Coast, among many others, in Australia.

For me, the main learning is that the future is political—it is a contested space. This is not political in the sense of electioneering of candidates but political in the sense of contesting the nature of reality, of past, present and future. All images of the future are not neutral—behind each are worldviews and deep myths. Politics is complicit in any future, even those that claim the value neutrality of trend analysis and prediction.

Teaching the Futures

Given that the future is a political space, how best to teach the future? What impressed me most in my years at the University of Hawai'i, and later working with Dator on various book projects and conferences, is that his pedagogy has embraced an openness to dissent. Even when he disagreed with students, and it seemed he mostly did, as Dator was closer to a secular view of the future while his students appeared to draw on spiritual traditions, he remained pluralistic. While I was inspired by the Tantra of Sarkar, Chris Jones from Gaia, and others from their own mystical traditions, he nevertheless encouraged us to find our own pathway and not insist that as professor he owned the truth. He taught in such a way that we were never made to feel wrong for our worldviews. His focus was inquiry, asking us to determine the implications of our worldviews—spiritual, secular, religious, both-and—on how we constructed the future. While certainly I believe he would have preferred having more students that shared his view of reality, this never appeared to be a problem for him. Dator was foremost an educator. Proud of his students and wishing them well in whatever goals they sought, he did not seek to convert them, even if they may have tried to convert him.

The main learning for me as a teacher of futures studies is, within the context of rigorous theory and robust methodology, to let each student find his or her space. Futures studies is not about indoctrination but about encouraging students to articulate their own theories of social change, to unpack how their worldviews and narratives influence the futures they see and seek to create. I have found this approach beneficial in teaching futures studies in different nations. For example, Taiwan differs from Singapore, as Malaysia, differs from Australia, and Pakistan, and elsewhere. While the theoretical and methodological basis remains the same, the how of teaching differs. In Taiwan, for example, successful teaching of futures studies, for me, has been to challenge my own authority, allowing students—who overly defer to professors—to claim their power. This has often been possible by moving the classroom to the hotel conference room, thus disrupting the strict distance in Confucianism from student to professor that occurs in university settings.

Futures Studies as Practice

My insights on futures studies as practice came from a setting which intriguingly disavowed practice. The Department of Political Science, University of Hawai'i in the 1970s and 1980s was a democratically radical place. Students even had a role in deciding which professors were recruited. Debates on theory were robust and always one step ahead of the field. Visiting scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein, William Irwin Thompson, and Johan Galtung added a jolt even to the existing radicalism of the department. However, there was one unconscious dimension to the culture, which, upon reflection, was unhealthy. The dominant culture suggested that money

was evil, that getting jobs was selling out and that training for the non-academic world was a selling of the soul. While one can certainly be sympathetic to a critique of monopoly capitalism, the pathology was that of disowning the economic, one “real” world. Dator, however, challenged this culture. Not only did he encourage students to gain employment or become consultants after graduation, he built an intern program into the MA degree. Moreover, given that he was a sought-after speaker, he regularly asked us to replace him for speeches and training exercises. He brought us along to foresight workshops.

In the early 1980s, Dator was to conduct a foresight workshop for the Federal Credit Union. Based on a number of papers I had on the rise of China—the Pacific Shift—he invited me to present my work to them. While my presentation had substance, I delved too much into detail instead of offering a general overview of East Asian futures. I was nervous, so I spoke too quickly. Watching Dator, however, I did not sense any anxiety. The main reason for this was that Dator constructed the practice of futures studies as an experiment. It was a hypothesis, not an ideological sermon. In the teaching process as well in the alternative futures process, things can go awry, moving in unexpected directions. Futures studies qua experimentation allowed these directional changes. The practitioner can be flexible, ready for failure, even as success is imagined.

For me, seeing praxis as hypothesis removed a great deal of anxiety in the public presentation of futures studies. There was no one to convince, no ideological position to uphold—rather, this was a co-creative journey. Hopefully, participants would explore alternative futures, experiment with scenarios, fashion their preferred future and create action learning strategies, but this was not at all certain, a done deal. They might resist, they might walk away: this would be their challenge. The role of the futurist in this sense was, as metaphor, “Johnny Appleseed”—to fling out ideas and with some watering, hopefully some would take root and grow. If they did not, this did not mean the project was not successful. Experiments are just that—we try, we observe, we try again, we learn—not just about the external world—them—but us, as well. We are the experiment too. That does not mean responsibility is eschewed. Indeed, staying with the “Appleseed” metaphor, the role of the futurist becomes that of nurturing particular young trees (foresight projects and processes), eventually moving toward the Banyan tree state, wherein they can provide respite to other travellers, who may tire from the business-as-usual focus on short-term thinking.

An Emerging Issue

To conclude, from Dator I learned the field of futures studies. Conceptually I learned that there is not one future but many futures and that the role of the futurist is to disrupt conventional understandings. I also learned that futures studies is a theoretical and political field. Politics is embedded in the study of the future. Futures studies is eclectic, mixing, balancing, integrating multiple traditions—the empirical, the interpretive, the critical and the action learning. Worldviews and inner journeys are not external to the study of the future but they are complicit. Futures studies must confront the organizing framework of the times—whether development or globalization or sustainability—even as it challenges these frames of reference and imagines new spaces and possibilities for visions and their dissension. Third, I learned that futures studies needs to be taught in a non-ideological way, letting

the student speak her voice. The role of the teacher is to support the student's journey; often the best pedagogy is getting out of the way and letting the student discover what she or he needs. The professor, while critical, is often the gardener, watering plants, and pruning, when required. Finally, futures studies, while having a theoretical framework and strong methods, is an experiment, an hypothesis.

To paraphrase leading European futurist and former University of Hawai'i graduate Jordi Serra, Dator does not just voice emerging issues analysis, he is an emerging issue. In being an emerging issue, one does not always follow the crowd of other academics. He was global and local long before others. Not cast in a particular identity long before digital technologies have allowed us to create many selves. He challenged the "ivory" tower of the Academy, through the futures workshop, through engaging in the world, long before action learning became fashionable.

And Dator does make sense from a macrohistorical perspective: as the straightjacket of the last few hundred years loosens, and we move to a world of many futures, instead of the linear progression of one, Dator prefigures the world that is emerging: not just the expert but the knowledge navigator, not just global or local but glo-cal, not just focused on the singular but the multiple, and not just focused on the weights of history, but as well on the possibility of agency. Futures studies, as articulated by Dator, if anything, should be judged on its ability to enhance the capacity to create alternative and preferred futures, to move from being fixed in space-time, to becoming.

I have been fortunate to have spent thirty-seven years learning from one of the founders of futures studies. My roommate in 1976 was correct. I needed to, had to, go and check out the hippie professor. I did and my life is richer for that. As is the world we live in and co-create.

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