



ESSAY

Facing the future is not for wimps

Martha Rogers and Allen Tough

Learning about various possible futures is often an unsettling five-stage process. In addition to cognitive changes and personal choices for action, this multifaceted process can involve strong emotions and deep existential questions of meaning and worldview. One common sequence is for the initial cognitive stage to lead on to an emotional stage and then a stage of the 'soul', before the person feels empowered and finally ready to act in the world. Understanding all five stages of this complex learning process enables us to be more effective facilitators with our clients, employees, students and children. It is useful to keep in mind the wide-ranging turmoil that may be occurring inside the individual who is learning about global issues and potential futures. The severity of this turmoil is captured by the slogan, 'Facing the future is not for wimps'. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd

Surprisingly often we find ourselves helping someone to face the future of the world. As consultants, managers, teachers or parents, for instance, we help our clients, employees, students and children to think about various alternative futures. It is such a common activity, interwoven with our daily life, that we often remain unaware of just how many people we are influencing.

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To be more effective in helping these people face the future of humanity and the planet, we need to realize how deeply unsettling their experience might be. And we need to understand their ongoing process of gaining and coping with their new awareness and knowledge, so that we can successfully foster their natural process instead of distorting or diminishing it.

Facing potential futures is a very demanding learning effort for many people. Some have suggested that this kind of learning is not only intellectually challenging but also emotionally powerful.^{1–5} Coming to grips with the complexity of the world's problems, confronting uncertainty about the future, and critically examining deeply held worldviews may cause emotional and existential turmoil. To try to cope with the onslaught of thoughts and feelings, people may resort to using defence mechanisms such as denial, suppression,

intellectualization or projection. Consequently, rather than truly being able to face the future, the protective defence mechanisms may cause people to retreat or disconnect from reality. Thus, paradoxically, the learning process may lead to paralysis rather than mobilizing informed choice and action.

Though most would agree that people need to learn about potential futures, we often underestimate the complexity of the learning process. The experiences and research of the authors suggest that learning about potential futures frequently involves five stages or dimensions. To illustrate these five stages, we draw on the experiences of adult students interviewed by Martha Rogers⁶ after they completed a futures course with Allen Tough, based on his book *Crucial Questions About the Future*.⁷ It is useful and important for us to understand the five stages of learning so that we can be sensitive, caring and facilitative as we help those around us to face the future.

In the following we explore each of the five stages of learning and suggest implications for those of us who assume formal or informal facilitative roles. Before addressing the stages individually, it may be helpful to present a framework that will set out our conceptual map (see Figure 1). The model depicts the five dimensions that are often involved when people learn about the long-term futures of human and planetary life. Although the stages appear linear and sequential, there is, in fact, a great deal of dynamism within and between the various stages.

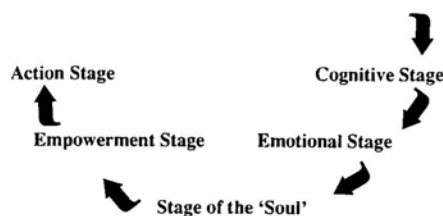


Figure 1.

Cognitive stage

The first stage usually centres on learning about new facts, ideas, trends, forecasts, scenarios and images of the future. This cognitive component is generally considered to be the central core of the futures field.

Even within the cognitive domain, learn-

ing about the future may be more complex than we often imagine, generating a variety of responses. Students who were interviewed said that when they began to think about the long-term future they thought it was 'airy-fairy', 'out-of-touch', 'garbage', or 'crazy'. It is likely that resistance to futures thinking will be a natural reaction for many people. In part, this is due to the fact that we are challenged to step out of our usual temporal orientation, which is in the relative present, to thinking far beyond our own lives and the lives of our children, or even grandchildren. In part, the resistance may be associated with coming to grips with the notion of alternative futures which challenges many people's belief that the future will be 'more prosperous' and largely an extrapolation of the present.

Resistance as well as responses of feeling cognitively overwhelmed are also related to facing the complexity of the world's problems and solutions. For example, in Rogers' study, people said they felt 'incapacitated', 'confused', and 'immobilized'. As one participant noted, 'It was like a crashing of reality against all of my hopes and dreams'. Another participant said: 'At first the issues and the complexity seemed so much. It was a big scary blur. Other species are becoming extinct, so why not humans?'. Thus, for many people, learning about long-term futures may cause a natural resistance and may result in an experience of feeling intellectually overwhelmed, confused and pessimistic.

This inner experience of fully facing the future can feel somewhat akin to a deep earthquake that shakes up one's view of the world. Donella Meadows⁸ has pointed out that those of us who try to help others face the future 'are in fact involved in a paradigm battle; we are seeking to redefine whole social identities and purposes. It is not a trivial task. We cannot expect people to give up ideas they treasure, except in exchange for even more appealing and affirming ideas, ideas that assure them that they still have a place and a purpose in the universe'. She also urges us to be compassionate as we help people struggle with a new paradigm or worldview—with their core sense of reality. 'Our ideas literally tear other people's worlds apart. We are already at home in the new world we have created for ourselves, but others are not. We have to make them feel welcome'.

Helping people grasp the complexity and depth of knowledge is certainly a key task for all of us, no matter what our particular work

within the futures field. We have to help them extend their usual temporal horizons, and face a wide range of possible futures. We may need to help them wrestle with paradoxes, counter-intuitive knowledge, fresh perspectives and new beliefs. And we often have to help them break through their resistance and denial, or their belief that nothing can change the preordained future. Finally, we need to support them as they modify or reconstruct their personal images or views of the world.

For most people, learning about the future is not merely an intellectual activity. This *mind* side of facing the future frequently leads on to four additional components. To be successful in helping our clients, employees, students and children face the future, we need to appreciate the multifaceted and holistic nature of learning, paying attention to all five components.

Emotional stage

Few people can learn about global issues and potential futures without experiencing an emotional response. The intensity of emotions varies from person to person, of course, but it would be safe to say that futures learning usually involves the heart as well as the mind. The stirring of the heart appears to occur when there is a shift from intellectual, detached knowing to a personal, emotional and connected knowing. The emotional response to learning about the future has been described by some as being like a roller-coaster, where emotions fluctuate up and down, often in a paradoxical way. Some of the paradoxical emotions include: depression—elation, anxiety—calmness, hopefulness—hopelessness, anger—acceptance, fear—courage, sadness—happiness, heaviness—lightness, to mention a few.

Denial, anger, depression, a sense of falling apart, powerlessness and hopelessness are often associated with the experience of grieving. Grieving has been reported as a common response to learning about global threats to human survival^{9–11} and with respect to human processes of transition and change.^{12,13} Learning about the futures of human and planetary life may trigger a grief response, a response to very real losses. For some, it may be the loss of old ways of knowing, of old assumptions about the world, or of old hopes and dreams about what the future might be like. Grieving may also be associated with a loss of innocence when people begin to truly accept the world's problems and entertain the possibility that

humanity may not pull through if the current path is continued.¹⁴

At the heart level, we must realize that many people will struggle with grief, horror, rage, despair as well as excitement and exhilaration. To help people cope with the emotional ups and downs, we need first to provide opportunities for the expression of emotions in a context that instills acceptance and reassurance that such emotions are commonly described by those who are facing the future. Participants in Rogers' study underscored the importance of being able to share emotions with others, particularly with those who have an understanding of the experience. They also noted the need to connect with beauty in their lives in order to cope with the emotions. For instance, some reported deliberately seeking out nature, focusing on the joy of children, the value of close relationships, or the pleasure of music, art or poetry. By facilitating actions such as these, we may be better able to help people eventually move beyond negative emotional reactions in a constructive way.

Stage of the 'soul'

When they face the most likely futures of our culture and planet, many people are affected at an even deeper level—the *soul* level. By the term 'soul' we mean 'the essence of the human being, the core values one holds and the theistic or secular meaning for existence and the sense of life purpose'.¹⁵ Although rarely discussed in the literature, facing the future frequently causes people to question their values, sense of meaning and purpose in life, faith, spirituality, life goals, or ways of living. This soul-searching can be a powerful experience that needs to be acknowledged by those of us who are in facilitative roles.

The awakening of the soul may result as a consequence of a growing intellectual awareness of global issues and alternative futures, along with the possible breakdown of old perspectives of the world and life, in concert with intense emotional responses. By way of example, people in Rogers' study described points where they began to question their 'total' life including relationships, work, faith, ways of living, and sense of existential meaning and purpose. Some said they felt they had drifted away from their 'core' or the essence of their being. Some felt a deep sense of dissonance between the way they were living and the way they believed they ought to

be living. Some questioned their belief in God, saying something like 'How could God be caring if He made the world the way it is?'. Some were consumed with questions about life and death.

Those who experience the soul-searching may describe feelings of meaninglessness or purposelessness as well as a sense of being lost or directionless. As one of Rogers' participants stated, 'I felt like a boat on open waters without a keel, directionless and being pushed in all directions'. People may experience a keen awareness of the need and desire to 'find an answer', to 'do something', to find a new way of living, but there is often a time of not knowing—of searching and searching but not finding.

Soul-searching and the experience of feeling lost, directionless, or groundless may be associated with various factors as people learn about and face the future. Some writers on personal change have suggested that when a significant change is occurring it may be accompanied by a crumbling away of a person's fundamental perspective or view of life, which is later 'reconstructed' anew.^{16,17} Before the reconstruction of one's personal paradigm, there is often a stage of being in between where the new life view is not yet clear but the old no longer makes sense. This phase is frequently marked by a feeling of being lost and directionless. As noted above, when people actually come to grips with alternative futures there may be a fundamental change in the person's entire view of the world and life, as many have reported. When this occurs for people, the soul-searching is a very likely phase of the learning process. This soul-searching can lead to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose, based on a realistic view of alternative global futures combined with an eagerness to try to make a difference despite the odds. The search for a deep sense of meaning and purpose seems to be much more widespread than many researchers and psychotherapists realize.

As part of the 'soul' stage, some people experience a profound connectedness or bonding with future generations (and with the planet), often as a result of music, nature, children, mutual love, imaging exercises, role playing, or some other experience that temporarily melts the usual boundaries. Although the experience itself may last only a few minutes, it can produce caring and altruism that lasts a lifetime. One of the authors describes these bonding experiences with the

following words:

My deepest connections to future generations (and to humanity and the planet) have come from music. Sitting with my two kids at an outdoor Beach Boys concert. Sitting with a close friend in the front row of a Moody Blues concert. Sitting in the front row of Kyoto's magnificent concert hall during some electronic 'healing music' devoted to future generations. Sitting with my wife at a youth concert devoted to 'Our Common Future'. At those moments, a deep emotional bond to future generations was added to my intellectual commitment and connection.¹⁸

As facilitators, we need to help people to understand what they are experiencing and we need to acknowledge the importance of supporting people as they dwell with the process of soul-searching, including the search for meaning and purpose both at the existential and personal level. It is this process that is often an important precursor to caring and committed action.

Empowerment stage

A satisfactory resolution of the upheaval of the soul can lead on to feeling a sense of personal empowerment, which is the fourth stage of the learning process. Based on the experience and research of the authors, empowerment occurs when the person begins to feel personal responsibility and commitment to do something, even if the 'something' is somewhat illusive for a time. Rather than externalizing the solutions, people begin to consider what is possible at the level of the individual. If people do not reach the stage of personal empowerment, then they may feel passion without being mobilized into action, or they may retreat into the pseudo-blissful state of denial and inaction.

For facilitators, the question during this phase is how can we encourage people to feel hope and energy towards the future, instead of sinking into hopelessness, paralysis or hedonism? At what appears to be a most simple level, a powerful strategy is to ask: 'Can one person make a difference?' This is a parsimonious question—simple in its complexity. It is a grounding question that helps people move from the theoretical, abstract level to the personal—this must be the objective in helping people to feel empowered. We also need to help people envision at least one positive scenario, such as imaging a future world without hunger or warfare. Participants in Rogers' study said they needed to balance both positive and

negative scenarios. Presenting only negative or catastrophic scenarios was reported to be immobilizing. In order to feel empowered, people need to hear or read success stories where individuals have made a difference, and they need to experience hope and cautious optimism from those who 'know the facts' but are able to sustain hope and commitment. Sometimes humour, laughing at the bizarre short-sightedness of our present path or actions, can help in lifting all of us out of the intensity of facing the future(s). To experience empowerment, people need to feel responsible, committed, and hopeful that an individual's actions can make a difference.

Action stage

Helping people with their personal choices and actions is often our ultimate goal, of course. If the learning process does not lead on to this fifth component, we may feel that our facilitation has failed. For those of us who are in facilitative roles, particularly with regard to the future, we hope that our efforts lead not simply to awareness but that they contribute to 'action learning'. This means, of course, that we help people to explore personal choices and take actions that are in the best interests of the present and future of humanity and the planet.

As facilitators, we can help people, young and old, by supporting their own paths of action, by telling what some others are doing, by pointing out that the search for good personal choices can be a long process, by helping with priority-setting and values of clarification, and by suggesting an array of career possibilities that are harmonious with personal passion and values. Most of all we can support people in their choices even when others try to sabotage them or when they have a high impact on relationships, job, or any aspect of personal life. We may not realize the impact of learning about the future on the personal lives of learners. In Rogers' study, several participants found that their learning prompted changes in their relationships, their work or academic path, their decision to have or not have children, and so on. These are deeply personal choices that need to be acknowledged and supported.

Ultimately we want to help people to make the sorts of choices that give humanity the best chance of achieving a positive future. We hope they will choose to consume less, recycle, make thoughtful choices about having

children, choose high-contribution work, and help many other people face the future. We hope that all of those whose lives we affect in terms of facing the future will come to a similar position to one who participated in Rogers' research. She said:

The realization that I am able to make choices empowers me; power is also dangerous if I do not take seriously the responsibilities attached to it. I can imagine all sorts of wonderful futures for humanity, but I have to realize that unless I consider my choices carefully and act responsibly, these futures have no chance of occurring for myself or for others. However slight my influence may be, no matter if the future is positive or negative, I want to be sure that I have done something to promote the former and hinder the latter.

Summary

Facing the future is definitely not for wimps! It is a complex, holistic, deeply personal project that often involves mind, heart, soul, empowerment and action.

Learning about global issues and potential futures can produce emotions and confusion that are profoundly unsettling. Martha Rogers experienced this turmoil herself as a doctoral student in 1991. Here is a summary of her experience, to illustrate how unsettling such learning can be:

I was awake at three in the morning, as I had been for several nights. I was feeling anxious and sad; my racing thoughts seemed very confused. My learning was profoundly disturbing, resulting in my insomnia. It was as if the new knowledge was crashing down upon me, putting into question what I believed was my thoughtful and articulate view of the world—including many of my basic beliefs, values, assumptions and expectations. How could I have believed that the world was unfolding in some utopian way? Had I been asleep, not seeing or acknowledging the significance and complexity of global issues—nor what they might portend for the future of humanity, the planet and the universe?¹⁹

The fact that an experienced educator and consultant was so profoundly affected by her learning about the future emphasizes the powerful effects of the far-reaching 'earthquake' produced by such learning. This, in turn, points up how sensitive and careful we must all be when helping anyone to learn about the future. Those of us who are consultants, managers, teachers, therapists, parents, or in some other facilitative role, need to appreciate the complexity of this learning process. We need to resist the temptation to view this as simple cognitive learning.

As we enhance our understanding of the individual's multifaceted learning process, we are more likely to be truly helpful to people who are facing humanity's extraordinary range of potential futures. As we said at the end of our earlier (preliminary) article, 'Through a greater understanding of the learning process, as it is experienced by the learner, it will be increasingly possible to enhance strategies to facilitate the learning that is crucial for human and planetary survival in the future'.²⁰

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