SIDLING INTO OUR FUTURES:

provocation as a path to critical futures fluency

Wendy L. Schultz

[excerpted from *Futures Fluency:*

explorations in leadership, vision, and creativity]

This essay briefly explores the links among critique, futures fluency, and creativity. It highlights similarities among the three skills and suggests ways in which they might reinforce each other. Critique as used here means the excavation and unpacking of internalized assumptions about the way the world works, about who gets to influence its workings, and about what directions those workings will take. This unveiling of assumptions is meant to unfetter people's thinking from the cognitive and affective structures that those in power use to constrain our behavior. Futures fluency refers to proficiency and delight in the creative, critical, and constructive uses of rigorously imaginative speculation. Its five cornerstone activities are 1) looking for, and monitoring, change; 2) critiquing the implications of change; 3) imaging difference; 4) envisioning ideals; and 5) planning achievement. Finally, this essay taps de Bono's concept of *lateral thinking* as a means consciously to expand the skills of critical futures fluency.

Critique and Futures Fluency

We live surrounded by the reified visions of the centuries. Cooptation is the first line of defense for the status quo and so every living vision must undergo continual revision for renewal's sake. That means challenge and revolution must also be continual, and the happy ever after ending foregone. Discussing Nietzche's concept of critical, or `effective,' history, Foucault notes,

History becomes `effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being... `Effective' history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millenial ending.[1]

An imperative of revisioning, he seems to be saying, is shattering the single into the many: dissipating the whole, making discontinuous the continuous.

The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us.[2]

One way to break the constraints of the old vision is to consider alternatives. Loosing our imaginations to invent discontinuous possible futures enriches our ability to envision preferable futures: imaging difference heightens our potential for envisioning the ideal.

Habermas agrees, suggesting that ideological criticism begins with a "counterfactually projected reconstruction" of what social structures people might hypothetically design if they were given the opportunity to work together to determine their needs collectively. Communities should develop visions collectively; the revolutionary process of envisioning a preferable future and critiquing the present must be a participatory process. A vision which ignores some voices will oppress even before it reifies. Castoriadis sees participation as critical to developing universal autonomy as well:

Praxis is a type of action which involves taking others into account and regarding them as autonomous beings capable of developing their own autonomy....The revolutionary project builds upon the creativity and autonomous aim of *praxis*. It is, in essence, the project of a radical transformation of society with a view to the autonomy of all, `the reorganization and reorientation of society by the autonomous action of [people].'[3]

People acquire autonomy through self-conscious reflection. Taking others into account when practicing vision empowers them to question themselves, to critique social structures, and to image new realities. People learn best by doing; visioning creates autonomy.

The practice of social criticism through vision is emancipatory. It dares the imagination, challenges assumptions, and declares its independence from traditions. Visioning is not for the nervous. Problematizing the present through vision erases the security that springs from the taken-for-granted.

...the will to knowledge...ceaselessly multiplies the risks, creates dangers in every area; it breaks down illusory defences; it dissolves the unity of the subject; it releases those elements of itself that are devoted to its subversion and destruction.[4]

What is subverted and destroyed in Foucault's perspective are the structures of dominance hidden in our language, our habits, our manners, mores and traditions. Imaging alternative futures and envisioning preferred futures act also to create dangers and break down defences. Participatory imaging of alternative futures engages the community as a whole in dissociating the structures of reality, and reassociating them into the possibilities of new realities.

What would a social reality look like if constructed to legitimate the endless search for structures of dominance and thus to legitimate endless subversion, revolution, and revisioning? It would be anarchic, playful, experimental, flexible, free, and scary as hell. As our degrees of freedom and potential for creative action multiply, so do our risks. We trade the security of objective stability to gain autonomy; autonomous individuals must create their own security as well as their own values and vision. Which brings us full circle: joining others in the social construction of a vision engenders a secure community which celebrates autonomy and creativity. How, then, do we take the first step, strengthening our creativity in order to strengthen our skills of imagination, vision, and critique?

Futures Fluency as Lateral Thinking

We normally get our picture of the future by extending present trends and anticipating convergences where different things come together to produce a new effect. There are times when we need to get a richer view of the future and to seek possible discontinuities. For that we need creativity.[5]

Unfortunately, the traditional Western, industrial-oriented education does not promote creativity. In fact, it irons most of the creative wrinkles out of our cerebra. Our educational systems are designed to produce prompt, polite, pragmatic, present-oriented, productive workers. We are rewarded for identifying problems, managing complex systems, critiquing the present state, but rarely praised for generating wild ideas or focussing on far horizons. One of the first techniques designed to help people generate ideas, wild or otherwise, is brainstorming. It is simple, easily taught, and fairly effective at generating ideas quickly.

Brainstorming has a very simple basic rule: don't judge. Simply lob ideas out as they come to you. Let other people do the same. The facilitator's primary job in a brainstorming session is to keep ideas flowing. This means acting as an enforcer of the groundrules that people agreed upon at the beginning of the meeting.

Why do we need the sort of group trust that good facilitation builds? Because creative thinking is risky. Good group process creates a temporary, synthetic culture which offers participants safety and security for risky thinking. It also offers techniques to combine, overlay, transform, and develop individual products of creative thinking into community projects.

Edward de Bono, author of over forty books on the theory and practice of consciously applied creativity -- or

what he calls "lateral thinking" -- thinks brainstorming overrated. It is, he critiques, a shotgun approach to idea generation, developed initially for use in advertising, which produces too high a percentage of crazy or unworkable ideas per session. Advertisers can find productive uses for seemingly unrelated but exciting concepts, but in most other venues greater focus in idea generation pays off more.

De Bono argues that our brains simply aren't designed to be creative in the first place. They are designed to absorb information and arrange it in patterns. Our brains thereafter attempt to fit all additional information into those established patterns and do so, unless extremely provoked. He thus suggests deliberately provoking the brain in order consciously to leapfrog those established patterns -- hence "lateral" thinking.

Lateral thinking is conceptualized as the necessary balance or complement to vertical thinking. Vertical thinking follows and reinforces established patterns; lateral thinking smashes across established patterns, transforming them and creating new patterns.

With vertical thinking one concentrates and excludes what is irrelevant, with lateral thinking one welcomes chance intrusions.

Vertical thinking is selection by exclusion. One works within a frame of reference and throws out what is not relevant. With lateral thinking one realizes that a pattern cannot be restructured from within itself but only as the result of some outside influence. So one welcomes outside influences for their provocative action. The more irrelevant such influences are the more chance there is of altering the established pattern. To look only for things that are relevant means perpetuating the current pattern.

Vertical thinking follows the most likely paths, lateral thinking explores the least likely.

Lateral thinking can be deliberately perverse. With lateral thinking one tries to look at the least obvious approaches rather than the most likely ones. It is the willingness to explore the least likely pathways that is important for often there can be no other reason for exploring such pathways. At the entrance to an unlikely pathway there is nothing to indicate that it is worth exploring and yet it may lead to something useful. With vertical thinking one moves ahead along the widest pathway which is pointing in the right direction.[6]

This is precisely the sort of creative thinking futures fluency requires. Futures fluency starts with the assumption that the pattern of the future, whatever future emerges, will be vastly different from the current pattern, and that our first task must therefore be to imagine difference. Futures fluency further assumes that exploring the least obvious possible future will prove more useful than fully describing the "most likely, most probable" future. In short, the requirements of futures fluency map neatly onto the characteristics of lateral thinking.

This becomes more evident when you compare De Bono's exercises to enhance lateral thinking with the workshop exercises to facilitate futures fluency. With provocation as his primary goal, De Bono invented a word, *po*, which he suggests using as a signifier to warn people they are about to hear a deliberate provocation: *Po*, in 2043 tourism will cease to exist. Listeners then ask themselves and each other, "tourism in what sense?" "Why will it cease to exist?" "What transformations will the industry, the customers, the destinations, or society undergo that might make that statement true?"

Po can be used as shown to unleash a provocative, seemingly nonsensical statement for group discussion. It may also be used to link a random word to a concept, goal, or product in order to elicit innovative idea associations: rapid transit *po* helium (I chose helium as an example by letting my dictionary fall open and blindly putting my index finger down on a word). What qualities or characteristics do participants associate with helium? How might those characteristics relate to rapid transit design?

Other exercises De Bono suggests are *challenge*, *exaggeration*, *distortion*, *reversal*, and *wishful thinking*. *Challenge* basically refers to recapturing that childlike innocence about why things happen they way the do: why do we all drive cars to work? why do women shave their underarms, but men don't? *Exaggeration* takes some idea, quality, or trend and inflates it *ad absurdum*: washing and waxing your car once a week prevents rusting and maintains the finish -- why not a self-washing car that cleans itself

immediately as needed? *Distortion* asks participants to transmute the familiar and render it unfamiliar: housekeys truly become house *keys* -- musical signatures that define your house's decor, unlock its computer functions, and combine with your car *keys*, office *keys*, and RV *keys* to create your little signature symphony.

Reversal refers to restating an assumption, constraint, or concept as its logical opposite: all dogs have fleas -- no dogs have fleas (fleas become allergic to dogs? extinction of fleas as species?). Finally, *wishful thinking* also asks us to recapture a childhood skill -- daydreaming -- by stating our desires without letting the pragmatic adult mindset edit them into nonexistence: all children receive three nutritious meals a day.

These five exercises problematize the ordinary. Compare them with the assumptions and processes of futures fluency: futures fluency exists to *challenge* the assumptions with which we operate in the present, by telling us the only certainty is change. Emerging issue extrapolation is basically *exaggeration* : from the trends of increasing credit card use and ATM card distribution, exaggeration develops a scenario for "smart money." Cross-impact analyses enable us to *distort* the roles, patterns, and objects we take for granted now into some transformed future: tourism becomes at-home recreation with the advent of virtual reality CD's of Hawaii, of the Serengeti, of the Himalayas.

Reversal and *wishful thinking* are the heart of vision workshops. Reversal is the quickest way to get people from a cathartic statement of their woes to a wishfully thought out vision of a preferred future: the U.S. court system is slow, ineffective, and intolerant of other cultures -- the U.S. court system of 2025 acts on cases within a week, resolves 90% of the cases to the satisfaction of the parties involved, and requires cross-cultural training of all affiliated professionals. That is <u>obviously</u> *wishful thinking* , and it was achieved via *reversal* . Because reversal is a simple logical process, most people will simply go ahead and do it when asked, without invoking their internal "yes, but..." editor. It is thus an effective springboard into vision.

Futures fluency problematizes the present -- which for most of us **is** the ordinary. But in order to achieve fluency in thinking about all the futures possible, we must challenge the mundane within our own minds. Lateral thinking skills enlarge the scope and flexibility with which we ask "why?" and "what if...?" The matrix below suggests three exercises to pry people's thinking out of accustomed paths.

When Provoking Alternative Futures, facilitators begin by offering everyone (or each working group, in a larger workshop) a *po* . For example, in a community planning workshop, facilitators might begin: *Po* , no-one owns their own home. For fifteen minutes people then brainstorm supporting statements that would make this provocation true, explain how it works, and suggest what impact it has on community life.

Some of the explanations may contradict each other. If so, participants may arrange their list into groups of ideas and concepts that are internally consistent. These groups are, in essence, the foundation of possible scenarios of alternative futures for the community. This exercise forces thinking out of accustomed tracks and gives the facilitators an opportunity to reward such risky thinking.

The assignment of The Persistent Child is to ask "why?" and "why?" and "why?" again. Participants first identify target assumptions. Within a city government or a corporation, the most rewarding targets will often be "how" -- how do we do this? The city generates revenue from taxes, from fines, from municipal bonds; the snack-food corporation distributes all its goods in convenience stores. Why? Why not a lottery, or foreign aid, or a mandatory service year, to enlarge city resources? Why not distribute snack foods at bus kiosks, offer them on airplanes, attach dispensers to phone booths?

This exercise asks people if they are living or working in a rut: are they continuing along a certain path "because it's always been that way?" *Has* it always been that way? What other options exist -- or need review, if suggested previously? Have conditions changed? The Persistent Child asks that people look closely at the "givens" in their environment -- and evaluate whether they really *are* givens.

To generate transformations or distortions that help open a window to a possible future, participants first choose something in the present as a focus, say houseplants. De Bono suggests that nouns make better random word provocations than other types of verbs, so assume the randomly chosen noun is *chorale* . The

random provocation is thus "houseplants *po* chorale."

What possibilities does this combination conjure up? The example was chosen with malice aforethought: one possible future this provocation suggests is described in J.G. Ballard's "Prima Belladonna." In the future within this story, bioengineering has produced orchids that sing, and can be trained to sing chorale works *en masse*. The provocation of this unlikely pairing *distorts* an ordinary piece of the present, houseplants, into an alien, if beautiful, artifact from a possible future.

Other exercises featuring lateral thinking with a futures focus are possible. In *Serious Creativity*, De Bono suggests that lateral thinking provides a unique tool for thinking flexibly about the future:

Creativity is also required for laying out the possible future in which we may have to work. ...creativity is needed to produce the discontinuities that will not arise from the extrapolation of present trends.[7]

The acknowledgement that there might be alternatives and the search for those alternatives is a fundamental part of creative thinking. Indeed, the different techniques of lateral thinking are directed to finding new alternatives.[8]

The exercises described stretch people's thinking about the present and the future. They enhance our ability to see things differently, to break out of our assumptions, prejudices, and worldviews. Thus they provide the initial momentum for acquiring a critical futures fluency.

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