Disciplined drifting and the art of foresight

Foresight is an approach to anticipate future development, explore alternative futures, and trigger responses in the present in order to reach a desired future (Rohrbeck, 2011; Miles et al., 2008). While it is widely used to guide long-term policy making and support company strategy making, there are often two major shortcomings: it may produce a result that is unimaginative and uninspiring, or the result might be something that seems irrelevant and separate from the present operational reality. Thus a key challenge is to find the balance between exploratory and normative outcomes.

In this paper, we describe different roles for the arts in enhancing creativity in foresight, and present the idea of disciplined drifting as a guideline for practicing foresight. We base our analysis on the experiences we have gathered from numerous participatory foresight processes we have facilitated. By disciplined drifting we mean being open to unexpected associations and serendipitous findings while ensuring systematic, collaborative, and flexible process of futures exploration. While the theme and scope of a foresight process might be set at the start, in disciplined drifting they are not set in stone, but open for reinterpretation when new ideas emerge out of sharing and building upon each other’s ideas and knowledge. The real question of interest regarding alternative futures might emerge during the foresight process. However, often this kind of reframing is not allowed, which may result in outcomes that end up gathering dust in bookshelves.

Disciplined drifting requires opening up the mindsets of participants. Art has three roles to play in this. The first is using art as a source of ideas and images about alternative futures. We call this the object role. In this case, pieces of art are either analysed in their own right to get insight about the future (see e.g. Davies & Sarpong, 2013), or brought into the foresight process as catalyst artefacts invoking ideas and giving permission to think differently. The aim is to broaden the exploration of alternative futures from rational fact-based thinking towards utilising imagination and all the senses. Art offers another way of knowing that is embedded in the artefact itself.

The second role is using art as an integral part of the foresight process, as a tool for challenging mindsets. We call this the process role. Different forms of art have been used increasingly as part of a foresight process to enhance creativity and to explore, interpret, present, and embody alternative images of the future (see e.g. Selin, 2015; Koivisto & Myllyoja, 2011). Also, here art broadens the ways of knowing about the future by introducing designing by hands, being immersed into a depiction of a future world, or otherwise enabling the participants to use their whole body to investigate potential futures. Art in this case is focused on shaping and embodying the explicit outcomes of the process, such as scenarios, visions, or images of alternative futures.

The third role of art for foresight is as a skill, capability, or way of thinking. We call this the mindset role. Through approaching the theme itself as a subject of art, new horizons might appear. This entails the different ways of knowing and thinking mentioned before, as well as the ability to approach the theme from different angles and think and imagine alternative futures. The focus shifts from the object, be it the piece of art or the outcome of a foresight process, to the act of creation itself. While something will probably emerge from the process, its form is not known beforehand.
Rather than seeing the three roles as separate, we argue that they should be seen as complementary. This is the idea of disciplined drifting. Bringing pieces of art into the process and using art as a tool builds the capability to think differently and approach the theme itself as a subject of art. There are rules and boundaries, and an aim, but these are not set in stone, but reflective to how the process unfolds.

The three roles described above also shed light on how art practice can take part in a foresight process. Art can offer objects, catalysts, and metaphors around which the discussion on futures can take place, and which can open up new horizons. Or, art can be a more active part of the foresight process, and drama, painting, dance, interactive storytelling, music etc. can be integrated into the flow of thinking about futures, also enabling new ways of knowing. And finally, on a more abstract level, art can offer a set of principles through which to approach a theme or a subject in order to create something new.

REFERENCES


