Futures learning:
Notes from the global field of
arts, culture and conflict transformation

Mary Ann Hunter and the IMPACT Initiative
University of Tasmania
maryann.hunter@utas.edu.au

“How do we create more inclusive, more expansive, more liberatory and decolonial feminist futures,
and imagine - that actual work of ‘imagineering’... while currently existing in the complexity and
mess of what that is? How do we even start to talk about futures?”
(Refilwe Nkomo, Johannesburg-based multidisciplinary artist, curator
and educator, participant in the IMPACT Design Lab, 2018)

Whether the purpose of learning is to gain a qualification, train a workforce, educate in the ways of a
culture or society, or aspire to personal or social transformation, education policies conventionally
circumscribe the act of learning with the achievement of predetermined goals. Measurements for
success and failure, competency and achievement thus become corollaries to learning, particularly
as demonstrated in education policies of the global north that anchor education systems in broader
productivity agendas for employment and economic growth. Yet, a twenty-first century education
agenda (AITSL, 2017; P21, 2015) presents something of a paradox as it draws on the argument that
students today need preparation for jobs that do not yet exist and futures that are as yet
undetermined. A challenge for policymakers is how to appropriately address the need for ‘futures
learning’ in ways that go beyond complexity-reducing models of systematic input and output of the
learning endeavour that currently valorise high-stakes measurement and achievement (Gough,
2012; Mason, 2008; Semetsky & Delpech-Ramey, 2011).

As a response, the concept of futures learning is populating current discourse in educational
innovation: for example, in the work of the World Futures Studies Federation (2019), in the
education policies of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia regarding the use of technology in
learning and the redesign of classroom learning spaces (Bolstad, 2011; NSW Dept of Education,
2019), and across Asia with the focus of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and
Given its uptake, it is an opportune time to investigate the idea of futures learning more broadly, to
mitigate the risk of the term being co-opted as a set of ‘new’ skills-based strategies that do little to
change an old paradigm. The question for educators is how to enable futures learning to become a
relevant conceptual frame that disrupts a simplistic adoption of twenty-first century skill sets and
instead urges learners to see themselves as co-creators of sustainable futures whereby they can
confidently “act locally, connect regionally, [and] learn globally” (Wheatley & Frieze, 2006) to
‘imagineer’ change themselves? This question resonates with existing tensions of cultural and
education policy globally – within and outside formal learning environments – as it grapples with
supporting *universal*ity of rights alongside *diversity* of practice (UN Human Rights Council, 2018; UNESCO, 2006; UNESCO, 2010).

As futures learning is still an emerging and non-prescriptive concept, this essay therefore engages with what futures learning looks like in practice, and speculates how it might inform broader policy thinking. Importantly, this essay focuses on a case example of futures learning from within a context whereby ‘education’ wasn’t an explicit goal but planning for the future was. In selecting a nonformal learning encounter as a guide, the intention is to provide insights from beyond the typical practice contexts from which arts education policy is derived. The IMPACT Design Lab was a four-day immersive workshop in which 26 artists, educators, policymakers and conflict workers from 18 countries, including the author, were tasked with ‘imagineering’ a global infrastructure for the field of arts, culture and conflict transformation (ACCT). I argue that the experience was as much a learning exchange as it was a purpose-driven task and that it was characterised by four features: (i) an adherence to guiding values; (ii) a respect for diverse ways of knowing; (iii) a commitment to co-creation; and (iv) a pedagogy of question-making. I suggest that these features comprise a futures learning orientation in practice. Far from being determined by pre-ordained measures for success, failure, competency or achievement, it was learning encounter that was driven by an act of imagining “expansive futures” while engaging in “the complexity and mess of what it is”, as Design Lab participant, Refilwe Nkomo, so distinctly captured in her reflection (Nkomo in Evangelou, 2018).

The essay begins with a description of the context, background and activities of Design Lab as a component of the Mellon Foundation-supported IMPACT project, before turning closer attention to these four features. The analysis offered here is just one framing among a possible many of the IMPACT Design Lab. While having a designated ‘author’ here, the essay relates to a group experience and is drawn from many complex, wide-ranging and insightful encounters with colleague Design Lab participants (see participants here: https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/impact/design-lab.html). It by no means stands as a comprehensive, totalising or singularly representative view of the event and is intentionally tuned for a readership of education researchers and policymakers. In particular, the essay’s writing has been informed by the values framework of the IMPACT project (expanded upon below) and my interpretative overlay as a futures learning encounter is a necessarily partial, contingent and refractive rendering of a dynamic experience. As such, the discussion is informed by my specific and shifting lens as an arts educator, researcher, and community-based practitioner in the field of arts and peacebuilding, and is infused with my world-views as a white Australian queer woman and mother whose perspective, however decolonising it may intend to be, will be limited with respect to the experiences and world-views of my co-participant colleagues.

The essay closes with speculative discussion on the policy implications of a futures learning practice. For the field of education research, I suggest it offers a framework for paradigm change in the way that twenty-first century education is viewed: not as learning for the future, but as learning with each other. Significantly for this journal’s readership, the IMPACT Design Lab encouraged participants to decentralise and decolonise their views of the intersections of the arts, culture,
conflict transformation, and learning. For me, as an arts educator, the impact on my thinking about teaching and learning was significant, particularly with regards to my existing practice-informed questioning about the role of presence and curiosity in education (Hunter, 2018a; 2018b). In the Design Lab experience, new learnings about learning emerged, particularly as the value of question-making became apparent in the facilitators’ approach to guiding our complex infrastructure design task. In this, Refilwe’s question to consider how more inclusive, expansive futures could be realised, while existing in the complexity and mess of what that is became the impetus for this essay’s exploration with a wider policy and research community.

Imagineering the future: The IMPACT Initiative

Many major issues confronting communities, humankind and the planet today center around direct and structural violence and its causes and consequences. IMPACT imagines the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation field as well suited to address such issues (Avetisyan et al, 2018)

IMPACT’s ambitious interdisciplinary undertaking, to design a global infrastructure for work at the nexus of arts, culture and conflict transformation, began in 2017 although its foundation was built much earlier. The need for a coordinated network of support for the ACCT field had grown during 15 years of conferences and professional gatherings about ACCT and the implementation of large scale projects such as Acting Together (http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/actingtogether/), In Place of War (https://www.inplaceofwar.net/), Resilience, Arts and Social Transformation (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2310202), and Conflict Transformation through Culture, Peacebuilding and the Arts (https://www.salzburgglobal.org/news/latest-news/article/conflict-transformation-through-culture-peace-building-and-the-arts.html). In addition, recent international policy acknowledgement of the benefits of ACCT in the 2018 report of UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights (UN Human Rights Council, 2018) has garnered the field greater interdisciplinary and global attention. Over time, the value of documenting good practice, facilitating learning exchanges, creating research partnerships, and addressing questions of evaluation and ethics was identified as important for strengthening practice and connections across the field.

In 2017, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded an 18 month project to scope and design an infrastructure, lead by a partnership team of Cynthia Cohen from the Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts at Brandeis University, USA, Polly Walker from the Baker Institute of Peace and Conflict at Juniata College, USA, and Kitche Magak from Maseno University in Kisumu, Kenya. An international representative steering committee was formed to create a set of core values which guided the processes of consulting, collaborating and designing that would follow. The hope was that the process would
...result in resources, relationships, knowledge, collaborations, and networks that enliven and align forces of creativity commensurate with the challenges facing our local and global communities.

(IPACT Steering Committee, 2017).

Further, the complex nature of ACCT work was acknowledged whereby

... our best intentions do not eliminate risks of harm [in ACCT work], that ethical guidelines and better assessment standards and protocols are in need of development, and that training and education opportunities for this field need to be made more accessible.

(IPACT Steering Committee, 2017).

Following initial meetings and online research with 168 stakeholders and practitioners and two three-day online international learning exchanges with over 165 people from 53 countries, Brandeis University hosted a four-day IMPACT Design Lab to harness the information gathered, enabling 26 leaders experienced in ACCT practice, policy and research to scope the field’s needs and design a plan.

The Lab was facilitated by external consultants, Liz Dreyer and Richard Evans of EmcArts, in consultation with the project’s lead partners. The activities of the Lab aimed to enable participants to identify challenges in field-building, share experiences of field-building in other systems, and address complicated and complex field-building challenges. The distinction between types of challenges became important: complicated challenges were the focus for how we might enrich existing activities of the field; while complex challenges were those that tested our assumptions and develop bold new directions about how a future infrastructure might operate. A recurrent issue was how to design a relevant global structure of support with overarching universality and accessibility, while at the same time addressing regional and cultural diversity. Debate about the value of even labelling ACCT ‘a field’ emerged during the Design Lab discussions, with the critical role of futures learning both within ACCT’s ecosystem (such as professional learning among practitioners) and about the field (how to raise awareness of the field’s work and its impact on others) becoming apparent. This provided the basis for further enquiry about ACCT’s intersections with international policies for cultural rights and sustainable development, both areas which maintain a central place for education and foreground decolonising and decentralising frameworks for action.

The Design Lab was therefore a learning encounter in and of itself, under the guise of creative ‘imagineering’. This was a term that Johannesburg-based interdisciplinary artist and educator Refilwe Nkomo brought to her reflection of the event, offering a useful conceptual metaphor for our task: to imagine a future system of support while creatively engineering its design. This creative combination offered opportunities to both bring and test the boundaries of participants’ disciplinary understandings of their own work, as well as their personal ways of knowing and being. It was clear the Design Lab would not solely be a matter of project-defining or project-managing together, nor of researching or philosophising what the field was and what it needed. It was an opportunity to
imagine and design together, through the possibilities of learning together. While all the participants were experienced with ACCT work, we first needed to learn about each other before learning with each other and be challenged to unlearn particular assumptions and frameworks we each carried as gendered, racialized, regionally-situated, and differently-abled relational beings. The IMPACT Steering Committee’s statement of values provided a foundation of commitment and collaboration to the task, as well as a safety net for the sometimes challenging processes of unpacking complex thoughts, sharing sensitive and culturally-significant understandings, and unravelling manifestations of veiled power and privilege in a global learning encounter. The values grounded the work of futures learning.

**Futures feature I: Values statement**

*Leaning forward, stepping back. Sometimes vibrant in a bright new thinking. Sometimes weary and unknowing, lost in labyrinthine complexity.*

*We look, we reason, we sigh and we laugh. And we find ourselves talking about ... spoons?!

*We’re giving a random link between spoons and conflict transformation the De Bono Six Hats treatment. I struggle momentarily with the forced playfulness of an activity intended to spark creative thinking. ‘Really? With a bunch of artists who do creativity for a living? What ARE we doing again?’*

*But it’s an exercise. Nothing more. Nothing less. And I do these things myself in my role as an educator.*

*A timely reminder of joy, ah yes, the joy. We have committed to finding joy in this endeavour. And, of course, the value reveals itself, as we grow a sense of ‘we’. I lean back in to the play: wholehearted, whole-bodied. And I smile at the connectivity that comes of silly things – creative learning indeed! – and this profound opportunity to think way outside the box, but firmly inside a net.*

The Design Lab had a firm goal: to bring together practice and thought leaders in ACCT to create the design for an infrastructure of the field. The futures learning aspect of this was magnified by the global and interdisciplinary scale of the project, and its urgency both in a micro sense (of a defined and funded project), and in a macro sense of recognising

the urgencies and fragilities of the moment, including the vulnerability of the planet; the accelerating loss of languages and cultures and the wisdom they embody; and the assaults on freedom of expression and other human rights from many sources.

*(IMPACT Steering Committee, 2017).*

The IMPACT values statement therefore provided a harness for engaging with a complex task among people simultaneously collaborating and learning. While learning about each other and our work in diverse contexts was important, learning with each other meant adopting a core set of values to ground a sense a commitment to the task and enable an inquiry stance to be taken. In particular, the
values statement foregrounded the importance of inclusivity, reciprocity, and creative collaboration. These values were manifest in a ‘contract’ that we co-constructed with the Design Lab facilitators, and put into practice as key prompts for our interactions:

- be mindful of movements forward and back in discussion, and respecting the movements of others
- W.A.I.T. Ask yourself ‘Why Am I Talking?’
- Make concise speech so all can speak
- Speak how you speak and ask for clarity when needed
- Debate the point, not the person
- Honour your lineage
- Don’t assume another’s identity, speak from your experience
- Listen first for understanding, not for response

The values statement actively invited participants to commit to “a process that is inclusive of diverse perspectives, languages, professions and ways of seeing the world” (IMPACT Steering Committee, 2018). The alignment of the contract ‘items’ with the values statement was not always seamless: the W.A.I.T. directive, for example, had gendered inflections particularly for women with experience in institutions or social contexts whereby to ‘wait’ would re-inscribe systemic silencing of their already marginalised voices. But overall, the act of acknowledging the values in these ways was for me, at various points, a freedom, a safety, a reminder and, most importantly, a slowing down. A freedom in that I felt safe to question my own thinking and lean into discomfort as I needed, knowing colleagues were likewise engaging with the same set of values in response; a reminder to check in on the values statement when I felt we were running too quickly or extravagantly with an idea without due consideration; and a permission to slow down when the urgency of our time limitation ran the risk of short-cutting our thinking. The contract did not make the achievement of our purpose any more easeful or streamlined – in fact, the opposite at times. But it did ground a commitment to the practice of working respectfully and intentionally with each other in decentralising and decolonising ways.

Similarly, enacting the value statement that “knowledge that arises from multiple sources, including diverse wisdom traditions, indigenous cultures, artistic practices and conventional scholarly disciplines” (IMPACT Steering Committee, 2017) took respect, trust and a constant vigilance about slowing down. Where are you coming from? What is the lineage here? Are there culturally specific ways of knowing that are being marginalised or veiled here? How are First Nations voices and experiences be enabled or inhibited from taking the lead on discussions of effect and affect of this kind of work? How might a global infrastructure for support hold the tensions and paradoxes in that? To practice the value that knowledge arises from multiple sources is about not aspiring to be expert in knowledge, but to enact deep listening and challenge, in particular, the white-centric paradigms of university scholarship and endeavour. As such, the Design Lab leadership and facilitators avoided any singular proposition for the governance or administration of the infrastructure, with regards to ‘the ways things usually go’ in university or organisational
partnerships. While many of us had learnings to share from our own contexts, no one structure or model was upheld as ‘best practice’. Rather, awareness about the interdependence of all parts of the ACCT ecosystem was strengthened. With this awareness, the Design Lab’s planning process would be conducted “with creativity [and] joy in the sense of possibility it represents, and with respect for ourselves and the others we seek to engage” (IMPACT Steering Committee, 2017). The Design Lab experience, from an educational perspective, enabled a values orientation to be prioritised above a rush toward goal-orientation. In a global and futures learning context, this is vital. In being explicit about the role of values in practice, the values become both a freedom and a safety net for the work of learning how to learn with each other.

**Futures feature II: Respect for diverse ways of knowing**

Questions, questions, questions.

*Is there a sweet spot where we can be authoritative about knowledge and practices that define the field, without becoming authoritarian about what or how those practices are generated and shared? What are ethical ways to share and co-create and honour our lineages however strong, or emerging, they are?*

*How do we know? How do we know we know? Who is we anyhow?*


The IMPACT Initiative was underscored by Margaret Wheatley’s organisational principle of working intentionally with emergence (Wheatley & Frieze, 2006). Our task in the Design Lab was to apply this principle to envisaging how we might, in Wheatley’s terms, act locally, connect regionally and learn globally to support the ACCT field more broadly. Describing ACCT as an ecosystem was central to this purpose: it enabled the group to enact its wish for a distributed non-hierarchical leadership style and to integrate a commitment to decolonising knowledge and practices.

The concept of emergence in education philosophy and policy is not unfamiliar. From the writings of Dewey (1938) to the more contemporary work of Deleuze (see Semetsky 2006), Kress (2008), and Osberg and Biesta (2008), the concept of emergence is something of an antidote to the instrumentalism of education and standardised high stakes testing. The emergence “(re-)turn” in education philosophy has seen the purpose of a ‘good education’ questioned (Biesta, 2015; Apple, 2018) and has helped shifted an emphasis in contemporary education policy from what we learn to how. The paradox of education as both a means to acquire knowledge, as well as a process for allowing emerging ways of knowing to be realised, is an important contemporary one as taken up by leaders in decolonising education, for example (Tuhiwai Smith, 2018).

When this paradox is considered within the complex task of designing an infrastructure for a field that values diverse ways of knowing, any striving towards ‘a structure’ or ‘a criteria for achievement’ clashes with values of emergence. How can creative new paradigms and ways of relating emerge when old ways of working may disallow their potential? This paradox was enacted in myriad ways
during the Design Lab and was a core feature of Richard and Liz’s facilitation in response to the group’s exchanges over time. For example, respect for diverse ways of embodied knowing was enacted in a number of activities. After a heady first day of conceptualising, clarifying, question-making, and value-sorting in small and whole group discussions, we began the second day in silence tasked with creating whole-participant-group shapes of the letters X, M and R. As such, the dynamics of our knowing and relating to each other shifted from seated talk in a language (English) that privileges particular knowledge systems, to embodying concepts physically without the trappings of verbal conferring, justifying, debating, and finding consensus. The exercise was a creative collaboration that expanded certain limits of participants’ knowing: for example, about what it takes to create a new ‘group’ language, about individual leadership styles, and about the ways people can communicate differently when the paradigm itself has changed.

Are we doing a capital R or a small r? Our bodies have to take the lead here: shifting, arranging, relating to each other in uncertain ways. Perceptions flow upside down, left way up, and now we try the helicopter view. Curly script or capitals? Times New Roman or Comic Sans? The joy of achievement was palpable - a non-verbal enactment of “we”.

In a similarly embodied way, we engaged in a physical reflection on our final day guided Refilwe, an interdisciplinary artist with an embodied practice of creative movement and performance. In this session, again outdoors, we reflected by creating a low-focus, individual flow of movement, not words) for a few minutes before connecting with any nearby body to silently dialogue in a kind of improvisational dance. The dance was less a literal representation of the Lab as a processual way to enable the affective dimension of the Lab experience to materialise. For me, it provided a realignment of body with mind and a welcome release from the language-laden structure-building of the four-day encounter. It was through the knowing of the body that my understanding of the full impact and potential for focusing my post-Lab attention to making change was realised. The reflection was followed by a symbolic closing led by Polly Walker, one of the coordinating partners of IMPACT, drawing on her Cherokee lineage to invite us in a circle of simple sharing statements about what we would take forward and what we would leave behind. This ritualised way of knowing enabled commitments to future action to be realised that were both individually perspective-driven and collectively acknowledged.

Futures feature III: Co-creation

As the above insights into the activities of the Design Lab show, there were many examples of a kind of collaborative and enquiry-based pedagogy at play. Much like the community-based arts work that occurs in the ACCT field (see for example, the case studies of the Acting Together project: http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/actingtogether/), co-creating aesthetic means of articulating, communicating and transforming conflict often underpins the work of artists who collaborate with communities, cultural workers, and stakeholders. Without rejecting evidence-based or role-modelled ways of working that may be prominent in conflict resolution research and practice, using arts-based principles to inform the ways in which we imagined and planned together was key. Working within a futures learning paradigm, our learnings were therefore not about
attaining more knowledge, skills or information from or about others, but co-creating what we knew and where we wanted to go. These knowings are quoted at length here from the coordinating team’s report of the IMPACT project’s findings:

1. The ACCT ecosystem is vast, with players in different regions of the world engaging different art forms working in different institutional and community contexts as practitioners, scholars, policymakers, and funders. [The group learnt together] that infrastructure to support this ecosystem must be multi-faceted and able to accommodate diverse initiatives. Platforms must create opportunities for open face-to-face and virtual exchange, exploration of differences, accountability to ethical standards, and collaboration among these many players.

2. The ACCT ecosystem enjoys many strengths. Its knowledge base, artistic practices, theories, and frameworks come from diverse cultures, scholarly disciplines, and policy fields. Although more is needed, important books, articles, films, and curricula on ACCT have been produced in recent decades. Several institutions cultivate and link ACCT leaders from different parts of the world.

3. Many important obstacles to the full potential of the ACCT ecosystem remain. [These include:] ... fissures across power divides that limit trust; and the lack of sufficient resources to undertake sustained initiatives that are most likely to yield meaningful results.

4. The effectiveness of the ACCT ecosystem is limited by important needs [such as]: platforms for sustained attention to ethical questions; strategic communication and advocacy; opportunities for exchange within and across regions, with access regardless of language, technological capacity, ability, etc.; recognized, appropriate evaluation approaches; affordable professional development; rigorous documentation; adequate protection from harm and censorship; and space to develop shared vocabulary.

5. The ACCT ecosystem is emerging somewhat differently in different regions of the world. Leaders in different self-defined regions are eager to host convenings of nearby players in the ACCT ecosystem. Part of these convenings will involve developing a more nuanced analysis of regional strengths and needs.

6. IMPACT has sparked the imaginations, time commitments, and energy of individuals and institutions with deep relevant expertise and influence in local, national, regional and global spheres. As of January 2019, one individual donor, two universities and one foundation have committed modest resources to aspects of ... [the] proposed structure.

7. Theories related to complexity, systems thinking, strong field building, and emergent systems of influence can be useful to IMPACT as we articulate our own theory of change and develop strategic priorities.

(Avetisyan et al, 2019)
The interplay of ‘co-created knowings’ as ‘learnings’ was consistent with the collaborative and relational pedagogies we engaged with. Distinct from purely goal-oriented operational work in the conflict resolution, for example where the focus may be on problem-solving, the group worked at a level of conceptualising the field, identifying its areas of strength and potential, and considering appropriate strengths-based means of supporting it. We did this via the facilitators’ adaptation of the Cynefin Framework (Cognitive Edge, 2019). Drawing on complexity, network and systems theories, the Cynefin Framework supported the group’s engagement with obvious ‘known knowns’, complicated ‘known unknowns’, complex ‘unknown unknowns’, and chaotic or confusing issues whereby a knowledge-based response was not possible. The use of the Framework supported the view that our task was not to identify problems to be solved, but to create questions to be addressed. And while many artists among us conveyed they felt comfortable working in the Framework’s chaos and complexity domains, our learnings together in how to strategize – with a strong values base – to address infrastructural needs made our interactions dynamic and engaging. Through a co-creation of major questions of the field (including, ‘are we a field?’), we diverse context-specific and culturally-specific experiences and learnings to a collaborative space of question-making and responding on a global scale.
Futures Feature IV: Question-making

The term ‘wicked problem’ is often used in the context of social policy with regards to intractable conflicts or issues without easy solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Pedagogically, wicked problems are often used to focus thinking or learning about the challenges of social life in a pluralistic society, where institutional or centralised knowledge about issues can only be fragmentary, and perspectives partial yet are rarely acknowledged as such. Collaborative investigation of wicked problems toward social transformation can help sharpen interdisciplinary thinking toward goal-oriented solution. The “pain” of working “with thinking, tools, and methods that are useful only for simpler (‘tame’) problems” (Conklin, 2005, p. 3) can be uncovered in the process and lead to more productive, creative solutions. While defining something as a wicked problem helps identify gaps and lacks, there is a concern, however, they can also veil unintentional re-entrenchment of existing paradigms: i.e. the belief that for every problem, however wicked, there is a solution.

By contrast, in our Design Lab’s futures learning encounter, we were drawn not to the wicked problems of our field, but the wicked questions for our infrastructure. The pedagogy of wicked questioning leans toward an enquiry-based approach that releases a fixation on solutions and instead challenges the orientation and world-views presumed of the question itself. In the Design Lab encounter it took playful 6 Hats Thinking (De Bono, 1985) about the random concept of a spoon to arrive at a co-created learning environment of trust to enable us to raise wicked questions about, for example, how to engage in an interdisciplinary field of practice that is at once reliant on institutional funding, yet critical of institutional ways of working. Responses like ‘I do not know’, ‘I know not yet’, ‘how do we even start?’ are welcome in the co-creation of wicked questions. They require time and deep listening to address. Unlike the paradigm of wicked problems that urge expertised solutions, wicked questions invite relational thinking, ignite creative curiosity, and require a sense of presence to enable the “capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist” (Lederach, 2005, p. 29).

Of policy and power in futures learning

I find myself avoiding any sense of the word empowerment anymore. As an idealistic beginner community-based arts worker and once cultural policy officer, it was what one aimed to do – empower (to the ideal point of doing yourself out of a job!). I grew in those early years to question, though, what kind of power, for whom, for what? Power has many dimensions – not least of all the implicit but persuasively violent power of privileging ways of knowing that veil as ‘common sense’. What does it mean to globally support an integration of the arts, culture and conflict transformation in policy terms while keeping questions of power in play? What is the power of our Design Lab experience to influence futures-learning futures?

Patrick Schmidt asserts that policy is “as much legislation as it is a set of practices, as much analysis as it is a disposition, as much a process as a set of outcomes” (2017, p. 12). The Design Lab - and the goals of the IMPACT project more broadly – can be described as consistent with the direction of cultural and education rights policy, as articulated in the UNESCO’s road maps and

11
recommendations for arts education (UNESCO 2006; UNESCO 2010) and the reports of the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Field of Cultural Rights. But I use Schmidt’s observation here to leverage and expand the discussion of the interplay of power, policy and practice, and speculate how the Design Lab’s futures learning orientation has impact in this regard.

During the Design Lab, complex understandings about cultural power, the power of language and symbol, and the destructive potential of the arts to also cause harm and marginalisation circulated freely. We were among artists, cultural workers, educators, and researchers who trade in understandings of the nuances of power as it represented, questioned, up-turned, and even satirised in arts work in this field. It is unsurprising, therefore, that questions of power in the Lab’s field-making exercise were foregrounded: in particular, how to ensure power would not be withheld or upheld by institutions, individuals or agendas which might inadvertently serve to further the injustices of colonisation, oppression, and symbolic or structural conflict? Issues of power were therefore at the heart of the IMPACT project and its use of a values statement as a defining marker of practice in the field. Working to this set of values was a policy imperative of the Lab consistent with Wheatley’s focus on strengthening connector points (rather than striving for critical mass) to effect social change. When exploring the idea of an infrastructure, we wanted to see power circulating somewhat differently from the kinds of institutional and organisational contexts in which some of us regularly work. For example, our focus on equitable engagement of communities, cultures and individuals in ACCT served as impetus for these wicked questions:

How can ACCT work against inequitable power structures while needing the resources that some institutions within those structures can offer?

How can we build trust across power differences when the conditions for trust don’t exist?

How can we value equity between and within communities without imposing values, especially when some societies do not equally respect the human rights of all their members (e.g., women, LGBT people, and linguistic and religious minorities)?

(Avetisyan et al, 2018)

For all the leverage that UN policy attention may provide, it is a significant challenge to arrive at a common set of values, principles and purposes for what are very diverse and highly contextual arts, cultural and conflict transformational practices. In a world of complex and contradictory cultural and geopolitical forces (Kester, 2011), what does it mean to globally support this work that calls for new relationships with knowledge (Olaechea, 2018)?

Formal education policies, like so many other forms of institutional or organisational policy, attempt to contain, if not erase, the wicked questions of knowledge-generation. Policies, even those that often have greatest impact by “go[ing] misrecognised as common sense” (Richerme, 2018), contain strategies that aim, objectivise, create output, and validate outcome. Conventional understandings of education policy are that it seeks to garner certainty from uncertainty by measuring, marking, and distinguishing achievement within regimes of value that are (implicitly or explicitly) embedded in
institutional ways of knowing. This urge for certainty is unfortunate, for I argue that wicked questions are at the very heart of vulnerable acts of deep listening and deep learning. Placing institutional policy around education is therefore always already fraught with tensions in the domains of social, cultural, emotional, and academic learning. Urgent attention to the wicked questions of what and how to learn in co-creating sustainable futures is left wanting.

Therefore, the learnings of the Design Lab present policymakers with a wicked question of how to create new relationships with knowledge in futures learning, while at the same time acting within and upon existing and pervasive knowledge systems invested in the unsustaining ‘common sense’ power structures of old? How then could the Design Lab as a futures learning exercise inform new understandings of futures learning; not as a buzz word for innovative ‘strategies’ to deal with future economies’ occupational demands, but as a rubric for a paradigm shift in what it means to learn together to co-create new futures? The key characteristics of futures learning that could principally inform policy and contribute to this paradigm shift are:

- Learning that priorities the enactment of guiding values, above the achievement of predetermined goals or capacities
- Learning that invites learners to value the worth of ‘not knowing’, above the negative connotations of not knowing as a state of failure or lack
- Learning that priorities connectivity and collaboration, above the individualising systems of expertism and compliance
- Learning that reflexively unveils the institutional and cultural bias of learning systems so that so that diverse ‘ways of knowing’ are respected and engaged with
- Learning that embraces the intractable conflicts of life by building on ‘wicked questions’ that invite perspectives-sharing and emergence in a spirit of enquiry, curiosity and presence with complexity, over a solutions-focussed fix of ‘wicked problems’

Following critical pedagogues such as Paulo Freire (1970), bell hooks (1994), and Michael Apple (2018), and sustainability educators such as Daniel Wahl (2016), futures learning is not something ‘new’. However, examples of contemporary practice in diverse settings, such as this case example from ACCT, are important to explore so that the vital nexus of policy and practice is not lost to education paradigms that continue to pivot on educational attainment and advancement, as if learning was a value-neutral exercise serving the ‘common sense’ function of preparing for employment in twenty-first century life. The arts already lay special claim in education to challenging this focus. In its interplay of discipline and creativity, traditions and values, it enables learning communities to address the core critical dilemma of education at this time to address the human urge for certainty while developing the tools to live without it. Futures learning therefore embraces the arts as a creative practice that enables diverse ways of knowing to be respected and realised. This was clearly apparent in my experience of the Design Lab as a learning encounter. We were not just creating a future for arts practices in conflict transformation, but engaging in the arts
as a process to learn with each other in a global context – grappling with the big ‘power’ questions of aligning ethical universality of support with diversity of practice and of voice.

By way of cutting and closing

Cutting across this discussion is a classically Deleuzean paradox that shadowed much of the IMPACT Design Lab activity and continues to trouble education philosophers today: the realisation that “the creation of a system is the only way one can really live non-systematically” (Colebrook 2010, 5). In an effort to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016), this essay is not intended to wrap a theoretical totality around the event nor to represent its sole purpose as a futures learning exercise. Rather, the offer here is of a disciplinary border crossing to unmapped fields, an opening of the concept of futures learning to critical enquiry, and a suggestion that theoretically informed discussion of this ambitious global initiative could help others to envisage innovation and paradigm shift in their own contexts. How change-agents – be they policymakers, learners, artists, researchers – commit to guiding values, respect diverse ways of knowing, embark on co-creation, and enable a pedagogy of question-making is key. It is an unapologetically hopeful ‘imagineering’, embracing the complexity and mess of what is.
References


**Corresponding Author:**

Mary Ann Hunter  
Senior Lecturer, Arts Education  
College of Arts, Law and Education  
University of Tasmania  
Hobart, Australia  
maryann.hunter@utas.edu.au