

Alternative assumptions: a call for a more inclusive ontology

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We have learned from an experience working with the community of a remote village, Dankawalie, in Sierra Leone, West Africa that some of the assumptions embedded in the design of tools and methods used in facilitating futures literacy activities/exercises were not helpful in getting this group into an exploratory space. The results of those exercise got us to reflect on how different groups of people think of the concept of time quite differently from the dominant assumptions that underpinned the framework of knowledge we unquestioningly designed our workshops. Most tools, methods or approaches were western-centric and were designed based on the assumption of the concept of linearity of time, and that intelligence was hierarchical and often measured by tech-savviness. The set of assumptions failed to appreciate the contributions a good proportion of people in shaping and imagining possible futures. This phenomenon signifies the need for an exploration into reframing the dominant assumptions underpinning the epistemology of futures studies. The ontological assumptions that underpins scientific knowledge shape the design of conceptual tools we use for decision making; framework that defines the boundaries of how we measure people's experiences. For example, we measure people's experiences in clock time units without taking into account of all the other aspects of time. The dominant assumptions were that our lives were structured around the clock or the calendar, this led to how we extrapolate events based on time - think forecasting, budgeting, business planning, work & organisational structure; and even when we eat, sleep or do anything in our everyday lives. This paper presents the feedback from students and the learning points from two workshops at two different locations: Parsons School of Design and YMCA Singapore on challenging the concept of linearity of time. The workshop challenged participants with one question: How would you describe the events of your life not referencing to the time on clock or the calendar? The findings from the workshops call for a review on the tools designed and being used for teaching the future and how can those tools be more inclusive, in particular, the people with different thinking paradigms?

Keywords: tool design, tool development, ontological assumptions, linearity of time, teaching the future, Futures Study

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