

Queer futuring: an approach to critical futuring strategies for adult learners

M. Jayne Fleener and Chrystal Coble

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to develop queer futuring strategies that take into consideration adult learners' needs in support of transformational and sustainable change for social justice and equity.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper develops the construct of queer futuring, which engages queer theory perspectives in a critical futures framework. Adult learning theory informs queer futuring strategies to support adults and inform education to sustain transformational changes for social justice and equity.*

Findings – *With social justice in mind, queer futuring opens spaces and supports opportunities for adults to engage in learning activities that address historical and layered forms of oppression. Building on learning needs of adults to create meaning and make a difference in the world around them, queer futuring strategies provide tools for activism, advocacy and building new relationships and ways of being-with.*

Research limitations/implications – *The sustainability of our current system of growth and financial well-being has already been called into question, and the current pandemic provides tangible evidence of values for contribution, connection and concern for others, even in the midst of political strife and conspiracy theories. These shifting values and values conflict of society point to the questions of equity and narrative inclusivity, challenging and disrupting dominant paradigms and structures that have perpetuated power and authority "over" rather than social participation "with" and harmony. Queer futuring is just the beginning of a bigger conversation about transforming society.*

Practical implications – *Queering spaces from the perspective of queer futuring keeps the adult learner and queering processes in mind with an emphasis on affiliation and belonging, identity and resistance and politics and change.*

Social implications – *The authors suggest queer futuring makes room for opening spaces of creativity and insight as traditional and reified rationality is problematized, further supporting development of emergentist relationships with the future as spaces of possibility and innovation.*

Originality/value – *Queer futuring connects ethical and pragmatic approaches to futuring for creating the kinds of futures needed to decolonize, delegitimize and disrupt hegemonic and categorical thinking and social structures. It builds on queer theory's critical perspective, engaging critical futures strategies with adult learners at the forefront.*

Keywords Education, Futures, Queer theory, Social justice, Adult learning

Paper type Conceptual paper

M. Jayne Fleener is a professor in the Adult, Workforce and Continuing Professional Education (AWCPE) program, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA. Chrystal Coble is a doctoral student in the Adult, Workforce and Continuing Professional Education (AWCPE) program, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA.

Purpose

As described by Bisht (2020), "as practitioners of foresight we spend significant time and effort in generating narratives of possible, plausible and preferred futures [...] Often, the dominant worldviews are largely tacit, with practitioners as well as others participating in a futures exercise unaware of these biases" (p. 217). As adult educators, the authors recognize the challenges of accommodating adult learning needs as futuring activities take place, and the difficulties of engaging and supporting transformative learning experiences for adults when support for confronting unspoken bias is not provided.

The goal of this paper is to develop queer futuring strategies that take into consideration adult learners' needs in support of transformational and sustainable change for social justice

Received 23 March 2021
Revised 13 May 2021
3 November 2021
Accepted 2 December 2021

The authors acknowledge and appreciate the valuable insights and probes from the reviewers of this manuscript. Your comments made this a much better paper.

and equity. We will describe how queer futuring strategies focus critical futuring approaches (Inayatullah, 1990) and extend queering conversations beyond issues of sexual orientation, gender and difference, to enact strategies and perspectives for transformative social change. By supporting adult learner needs, a queer futuring approach will inform futurists' strategies for working in organizations and communities for transformative change. Queer futuring provides a framework with a specific focus on caring for and nurturing each other and the environment with underlying ethics of equity and fairness as desirable outcomes of our work. In the current political and social environments of divisiveness, mistrust and anger, queer futuring may offer some guidance for healing and emergence of collaborative visions of more connected, empathetic, fair and harmonious futures.

Epistemological, ontological and ethical bases for queer futuring

Queer futuring extends critical futures strategies to support efforts to transform social discourse both in terms of problematizing existing narratives, expanding past understandings, and creating new, emergent narratives with specific focus on equity and justice for future decision-making and action. This approach falls within the boundaries of post-structural critical epistemologies, ontologies and ethics.

Inayatullah (1990) described predictive, cultural and critical epistemologies for deconstructing and reconstructing the future. Citing Sardar, Inayatullah (1990) emphasized that although predictive and cultural approaches to the future operate within an existing episteme, critical approaches disrupt current cultural, social or political norms. Nevertheless, while, critical theory disrupts existing structures, it still can fall within the same modernist frame of argumentation across an interpretivist/structural functionalism framework with underlying dualisms and focus on power (Capper, 2019).

Queer futuring embraces a postmodern, post-structural stance by emphasizing nonlinear, unpredictable, indeterminant possibilities requiring transformational approaches to being, knowing and doing. Transformational epistemologies replace dominant knowledge frameworks in a Kuhnian fashion (Kuhn, 1962). Transformational epistemologies are accompanied by social changes in ontological beliefs, values, underlying logics of knowing, and ethics as well as interactions, behaviors and habits. Transformational epistemologies are rare but there is evidence that, as a society, we are embarking in a period of great transformational change. Living in what Bauman refers to as "liquid times" (Bauman, 2007), and associated with rapid change, technological innovation and unprecedented connectivity, Sardar and Sweeney (2016, 2020) describe our current social context as *Post-Normal Times* (PNT). PNT extends the uncertainties represented in postnormal science (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993) as indications of similar challenges to all of our social systems. PNT is different from other "post" movements such as postmodernism, post-structuralism or post-colonialism. PNT does not represent a criticism or denial of some past movement, discipline or intellectual discourse. PNT describes the societal context of disruptive forces across social systems indicating the need for radical social transformation and change to occur.

Queer futuring emphasizes the "making strange" process to decolonize, delegitimize and disrupt hegemonic and categorical thinking and social structures, thereby extending critical theory to the postmodern (Capper, 2019) in preparation for social transformation. As explored in this paper, queer futuring is situated in the perspectives of the knower (as an adult learner) within a social environment. This epistemological stance thus implies a relational ontology and ethic by opening up spaces for imaginative possibilities and alternative ways of knowing and being together in a social world, "creating transformative spaces for the creation of alternative futures" (Inayatullah, 1990, p. 815).

Linking queer theory, adult learning needs and futuring strategies that support emergent and innovative explorations of plausible and desirable emergent futures highlights the importance of maintaining focus on connectedness, relationship and context as we navigate and support

futures engagements and extend futures activities, especially during PNT and rapid change. Queer futuring will be defined below then more fully connected with queer theory, adult learning theory and futuring strategies to provide connections and explore applications of the queer futuring process.

Queer futuring defined

Converging from these three perspectives (queer theory, futures thinking, and adult learning theory), queer futuring is defined as a futuring approach that engages futuring strategies within an adult learning social context with queer theory perspectives in mind. Thus, our definition of queer futuring is: Queer futuring embraces the ambiguity of unpredictable and emergent possibilities and is driven by an ethic of openness and embrace of difference, an epistemology of disruptive binaries (Johansen, 2020; Rottmann, 2006) in support of non-categorical thinking (Bisht, 2020), with an ontology of emergence, intersectionality, relationship and connectedness (Kincheloe, 2006) for individual and social transformation, justice and equity.

Queer futuring uses futures strategies while engaging processes for “making strange” or “queering” the present to challenge existing blind spots where power and relationships are ingrained with the adult learner in mind. Queer futuring supports examination of constraining possibilities for innovative and creative solutions to occur with a focus on collaborative and transformative learning. Queer futuring addresses environmental and contextual influences and changes that necessitate fundamental change. And queer futuring maintains focus on existing dynamics that prevent sustained change for more equitable and just futures.

Queer futuring also holds in contradiction the process of change that itself is never actualized but a continuous process and effort, opening to inquiry each action-solution in an unending habit of queering. In this way, queer futuring recursively queers the endless litany of presents as a process that is continuous, dynamic and transformative. As Bisht (2020) describes decolonizing futures through story, queer futuring opens up conversations where long suppressed voices, ways of knowing and being and disrupted futures visions come to the forefront to create tensions and perturb existing categories while supporting adult learners’ needs and motivations for continuity and nurturing even in times of conflict and transformation. Queer futuring scaffolds readiness to learn, perturbation and experience to support individuals in social transformation engagements while resisting power-over dualisms and relations that replace one hegemonic system with another.

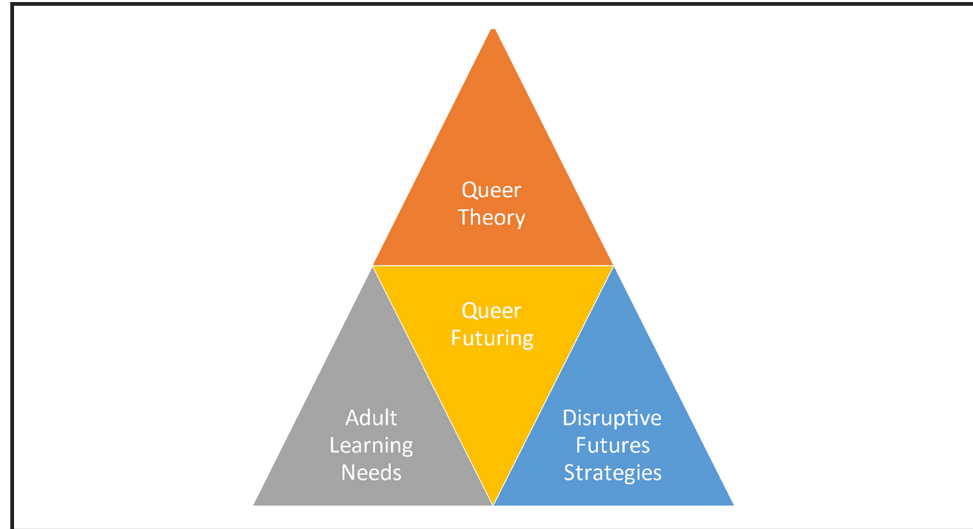
Queer futuring, as a futuring strategy, provides a framework for exploring and questioning the normative views undergirding how we think about our increasingly complex society. It provides a perspective for how we frame possible, plausible and preferable futures that exposes and disrupts traditional categories and ways of thinking and supports multiple perspectives and divergent voices. Queer futuring is a strategy for futurists to keep in mind as they work for social transformation and healing in communities that have become splintered and dysfunctional in times of rapid change, social conflict and ambiguity. Figure 1 captures the dynamics or perspectives that converge to frame a queer futuring approach.

Queer futuring components will be described more fully below as they may be used holistically to engage communities or groups of individuals to explore challenging situations in need of new approaches and social action.

Queer theory

Queer theory focuses on identity, disruption, advocacy, subjugation and ethical action (Halerpin, 2003; Pinar, 1998; Stryker, 2006), problematizing and bringing to light the unquestioned foundations, structures and assumptions of normalcy implicit in critical

Figure 1 Queer futuring perspectives



approaches (Capper, 2019). With origins in problematizing identity (Lacan and Fink, 2006), gender (Butler, 1990), and sexuality and biopower (Foucault, 1990), and supported by theories of consciousness raising (Freire, 1970/2018, 1998) and social transformation of identity (hooks, 1994), queer theory has expanded to include meanings related to “queering,” “making strange” or the “disrupting” of traditional dichotomous categories” (Rottmann, 2006, p. 13). Queer theorists have long emphasized anti-categorical thought to account for difference (Butler, 1990; McDonald, 2017; Sedgwick, 1990/2008) and epistemological framing (Sedgwick, 1990/2008). By queering binary categories and disrupting heteronormality (Lacan and Fink, 2006) that define our lives and our visions of future processes, we disrupt the privilege and power associated with identities that fall into normative categories.

Queer theory also confronts normative power relations in ways that do not replace one form of power with another but strive for social justice and transformation (Mayo and Rodriguez, 2019). The problematizing of dichotomous categories and bringing to light unquestioned foundations is what makes queering a fit for expanding futures strategies to consider sustainable change for social justice and equity.

The relationships among queer theory, postmodernism and critical theory are captured below. The origins of queer theory, emanating from critical theory, can be especially traced to feminist theory and issues of power dynamics. Queering approaches, however, move beyond the dualisms of critical theory, placing queer theory within a postmodern perspective.

Queer theory also has origins in questions of identity, ethics, hermeneutics and post-categorical thinking. Queering, as a practical approach, tends to be playful, disruptive and focused on emergent or creative possibilities (Figure 2).

As examples of how queering may occur in social transformational discourse, a comparison with earlier social movement strategies sheds light on how queering strategies may create opportunities for emergence of new ways of thinking and transformational changes to occur, especially in emergent contexts where the past may no longer be relevant. Two early approaches to community action and transformation can be traced to the use of community *Chautauquas* (Scott, 1999) and *Charrettes* (Sutton and Kemp, 2006). Civil Rights, non-violent movements similarly serve as an example of social action approaches striving for

Figure 2 Queer theory emergence

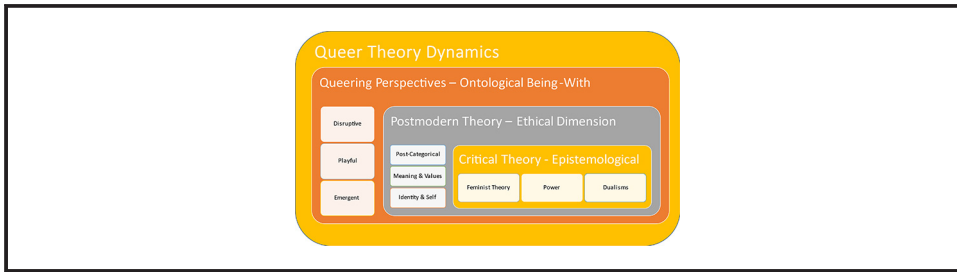
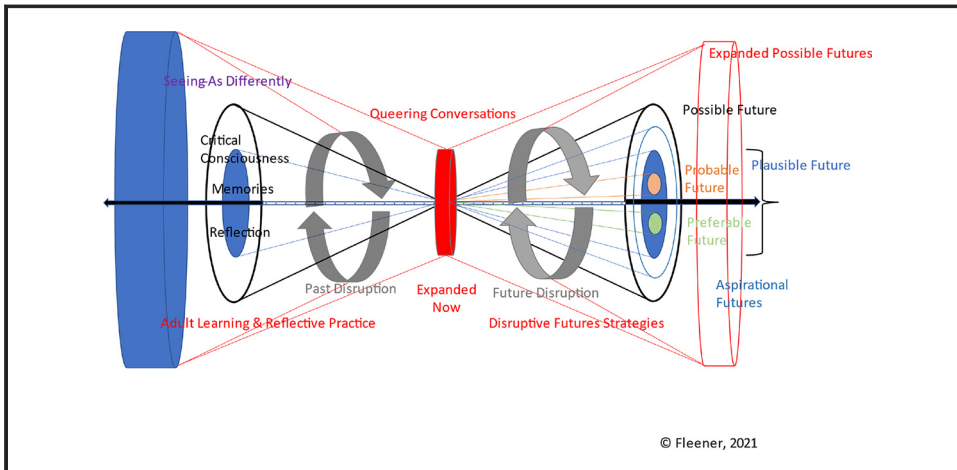


Figure 3 Expanded futures cone



transformational changes. These social movements will be briefly discussed below and compared with queering strategies to explore the epistemological, ontological and ethical differences among these approaches and the evolution/emergence of queer theory as it relates to PNT.

A Chautauqua is a community-focused event that supports community learning and exploration (Scott, 2016), often seeking to educate and inform a community about an issue or perspective. The word “Chautauqua” comes from an Iroquois word describing “bag tied in the middle” to convey the idea of meeting “in the middle” as in a gathering. A Chautauqua typically includes multi-modal presentations of a particular viewpoint through speeches, music and the arts. Many small towns and rural communities have used Chautauquas as a means to elevate educational opportunities for their citizens. Developed and used especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Chautauqua’s were typically used to reify dominant culture by meeting the people “where they were” to bring them to the desired knowledge or perspective of the existing and dominant culture. Chautauquas are a social transformation approach designed to replicate dominant culture.

Introducing critical conflict, a Charrette is a community action approach that strategically brings opposing groups together to develop compromise strategies or create common ground among opposing groups. An example of a Charrette was made famous in the film “The Best of Enemies” where local civil rights leader and activist, Ann Atwater, and the former Grand Exalted Cyclops leader of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) white supremacy group, C. P. Ellis, were made opposing leaders in a 10-day Charrette that pushed an urban

community in Durham, NC, USA, to address the challenges of segregated schools in 1971. The Charrette capitalizes on opposing viewpoints and sustained and intense interactions to support the emergence of compromise solutions that both sides can agree on. The goal of the Charrette is to come up with new solutions that present a win-win for both opposing groups. The Charrette exemplifies a social systems transformational approach grounded in critical epistemologies.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's in the USA is an example of social transformation movement driven by the ethic of non-violence. Ethically driven social transformation movements introduce a post-modern fluidity to the discourse of social change by moving beyond existing epistemological groundings to ethically driven social justice perspectives. Building from Gandhi's *Satyagraha* as a "truth war," the civil rights movement of 1948 India and the 1950's and 1960's civil rights movement in the US introduced social conflict mediated by a larger ethical truth – in these cases, non-violence. As Gandhi described it, how can we fight a war to eliminate violence with violence?

Queer theory incorporates an ontological perspective for social transformation, disrupting and challenging basic assumptions and exposing unquestioned practices with the intent of fundamental transformational change at ontological as well as epistemological and ethical levels for individuals and society as a whole. What queer theory adds to the social transformation process is a deliberate playfulness and "making strange" of existing circumstances while disrupting traditional ways of thinking and approaching problems and relating to others. Queer theory strategies eschew an assimilationist approach or a compromise approach to transformational change, moving beyond dualisms, to create new ways of seeing, being and interacting that do not simply replace one form of dominance or false categories with another.

Queering approaches thus dig deeper into exploring power relations, dominant cultural norms and histories, racialized or gendered biases and systemic policies and practices that support, perpetuate, and promote unequal opportunities, experiences or promises for the future. Queering approaches are grounded in a being-with ontology (Heidegger, 1993) that recognizes the impact of social contexts, overlapping identities, being in the world with others, *unconcealment* as transformation through relationships with others and the earth and world creating or *worlding*. Queering is supported by problem posing to investigate and change existing mindsets related to normative categories (Freire, 1998; Sleeter and Bernal, 2004) as well as social structures and power relations (Butler, 1990). Dialogue is especially important (hooks, 1994) for queering as social transformation and being-with relationships evolve and is an expansive process that extends current understandings while enlarging both past and future perspectives. Queer theory does not involve singular viewpoints and instead emphasizes perspectives that allow for multiple meanings (Manning, 2017) and is especially valuable for addressing a changing world where the future may be very different from the past. By using queer theory to embrace potentially infinite viewpoints (Manning, 2017) and applying them to reconsidering the past and engaging in futuring processes, relationships and ways of being, queering sets the stage for innovative approaches to social change.

Adult learning

While queering strategies are important for expanding the "now" of our current issues, adults consider and reconsider their past experiences to support their drive for participation in transformational community and social change with a specific focus to the future. Humans as a species have developed because of our ability to live in the future. During rapid times of change, however, where the future is likely to be very different from the past, new ways of learning and being are required. The question is, how can queering strategies support adult learners' needs, especially during and through transformational times?

Queering prompts adults beyond a return to complacency or normality by deepening conversations to initiate participation in social transformation and engagements. Adults are transformed through experience (Mezirow, 1991), initiated by perturbations or conflict that call into question the status quo as maladaptive, irrelevant or problematic. Transformational processes can be supported by adopting a critical stance (Brookfield, 1987) and through critical reflection (Schön, 1992), although critical perspectives are often not enough to get beyond the dualism and power dynamics that are oppressive. Reflection on problematic experiences and contexts, extending critique to challenge underlying assumptions and narratives, creates an “*expanded now*” that queering conversations support by making “problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – [...] more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92). To enact fundamental change, getting beyond cognitive explorations or understandings of problematic situations, social transformation requires concurrent and synchronized reforming of patterns of thinking, learning, meaning, valuing, acting, interacting and being (Illeris, 2009). Transformational learning occurs in the context of interactions with others in an environment that is also the context for and impacted by our interactions and changes, creating shifting needs and contexts for continuous learning, adaptation and creativity. During PNT, environmental challenges associated with rapid change, technological innovation and interconnectivity require transformational learning to address these challenges.

Adult learners are problem-oriented individuals who construct meaning and build from their life experiences and contexts, are internally motivated, and approach learning from a readiness to learn perspective for self-direction and life-long learning (Knowles, 1980). Formal participation in learning opportunities often fails to meet adult learners’ needs for relevancy and connectedness to life experiences (Collins, 2004), especially when unknown challenges and ambiguities disrupt historical ways of knowing and doing (Nicolaidis, 2015). Sustained change, especially at an organizational or societal level, often fails because of lack of readiness for or meaningfulness of change. Engaging individuals in social change initiatives can be especially challenging to balance individual needs and social expectations. This is why understanding adult learners’ needs is so important during social transformation efforts.

There is ample evidence of the role adult learning approaches have played in social transformation (Tuckett, 2015) as individual and social needs converge. Examples include Grundtvig’s Folk High Schools in 19th century Denmark that transformed the farming economy through cooperative efforts; the Highlander Folk High School founded by Myles Horton and Don West (Horton, 1998) in the USA, which played a part in transforming the civil rights movement by emphasizing non-violent activism and that influenced Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks as students; and the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2018, 1998) in Brazil advocating literacy development as a form of consciousness raising and political activism.

While many social transformation efforts work toward changing external contexts such as farming practices, voting rights and political and civic engagement, in our current Post-Normal Times (PNT), we are also faced with rapid changes for which past practices and understandings provide little support or guidance for future action. Being disrupted by social change requires additional strategies beyond those designed to disrupt and promote social practices and institutions. Transformational adult learning principles, connected to Dewey’s logic of inquiry (Dewey, 1939; Schön, 1992) become valuable not only for coping with unknown and unprecedented change but also for changing mindsets in ways that allow for novelty and creative solutions in changing contexts.

The ability to step out of individual self-interests and engage in multiple relationships with future’s possibilities is not easy for many adults. Adult learning principles embrace problem focused approaches that build on to individual and collective understandings and interests, scaffold readiness to learn and support passion for making a difference in the world.

Queering experiences can perturb adult learners habitual or subconscious expectations in ways that both open possibilities for the future and expand understandings of the past. Reflective practice encouraged through both queering and critical futuring activities expands understandings of the past and creates expanded possibilities for the future.

Futures strategies

While futures thinking and approaches vary widely, with professional futurists serving a variety of clients across the world with different goals in mind, futures strategies coalesce around key constructs of forecasting, strategic foresight, scenario development and imagining or creating visions for “what could be” (Dervin *et al.*, 2003). Many critical futuring approaches, including Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 2008), Integral Futures (Slaughter, 2020) and the Four Laws of Futures Studies (Sardar, 2010) emphasize disrupting dominant narratives, engaging in system-wide interrogation, and advocating for multiple perspectives and narratives including storytelling (Bisht, 2020), fiction (Lempert, 2014) and fantasy from an Afrocentric perspective (Womack, 2013). While these strategies provide a lens for creating preferred and possible futures, they are based in our current understandings of systems, power and normative relationships. Queer futuring insists on unimaginable transformation by rejecting the here and now and embarking on an unending cycle of uncertainty.

For example, Inayatullah (2008) uses a Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) approach to support adults in preparing for futures in contexts that may be very different and for which new strategies and perspectives are needed. Solving major social challenges from public transportation to environmental sustainability and climate change requires shifts in mindsets, values, relationships and ways of being in the world. The CLA approach was designed to support these kinds of shifts. Applying a lens of queer theory to futuring approaches such as CLA provides for an adult learning approach for social transformation that supports deconstructing and disrupting traditional ways of thinking and doing by digging deeper into underlying myths and metaphors that have long gone unquestioned while maintaining a playful, creative stance toward disrupting the past and creating a new kind of future.

Maintaining intersectional complexities and futures’ ambiguities are challenges for adults seeking comfort in conformity, knowability, certainty and closure. Queer futuring as an approach to equitable and just potential futures supports adults as they embark in futures’ unknowns and seek innovative approaches to solve some of society’s most entrenched and pervasive challenges, and takes adult learners’ needs into consideration to support their participation in processes that may challenge existing social norms and disrupt established categories and ways of doing things.

Transformational social futuring and the expanded futures cone

The relationship among queering perspectives, adult learning needs and experiences, and futures strategies can be captured by the Expanded Futures Cone (Figure 3). Through queering conversations, the issues under consideration are expanded beyond the traditional or majority mindsets or problematized as being more complex than opposing “sides” of the issue, to explore dimensions of connectivity across social dynamics and historical categories. This provides an “expanded now” or moment that is both expanded through the process of social engagement and expanded for the individuals engaged in the process. By expanding the present, the past opens up to more than a given history, to a critical reflection and re-interpretation of events of the past, creating in this reflective moment new truths and understandings. As adult learners, through reflection of past experiences, we reinvent and see-*anew* past experiences, beliefs, practices and social norms (Dewey, 1939, 1925).

The expanded now of queering the present context supports adults as they struggle to make sense of complex, ambiguous, emergent or contentious issues, moving beyond traditional or historical ways of seeing the problem to allow a different kind of “seeing” – what Wittgenstein

referred to as “*Seeing-As Differently*” (Wittgenstein, 1953). As Wittgenstein describes it, “seeing-as differently” is necessary for what he terms a “change of aspect” or what adult learning theorists describe as engaging in transformational change (Illeris, 2009) where mind, body and soul are impacted.

Andy Hines has expanded the Futures Cone (Bishop and Hines, 2012) to include the past (Hines, 2020) but does not address the issue of the past as something that can be re-invented, re-interpreted and re-experienced to change the present contexts. By queering the present to support adult learners’ needs to re-experience their pasts and see-as differently, a transformational mindset is created that is more amenable and supportive of critical futuring strategies and transformational possibilities. The expanded futures cone as presented above shows the relationship among past, present and future as emergent and dynamic across time dimensions as traditional categories and understandings are challenged and explored for future visioning to occur.

Enacting queer futuring

Involving adults in queer futuring disrupts present and past experience and patterns of thought while queering important social issues, meanings and relationships, shifting individual-focused response to uncertainty (Arar *et al.*, 2021) and supporting social transformational possibilities by emphasizing social discourse and action to create emergent/fluid futures for social justice and equity. By queering the present and engaging adults in an expanded view of the past, they can overcome the challenges of thinking about possible futures in ways that do not reify or replicate existing structures, categorical ways of thinking and power relationships (Inayatullah, 2008; Miller, 2018; Poli, 2015).

Futurists’ role in social transformation

Futurists have a role to play in transforming society. We are at a cusp of societal change needed to address the challenges of PNT. Futurist are needed as skilled and visionary guides who can support communities in their efforts to address some of society’s most challenging issues.

With social justice, equity, care and connections at the forefront, queer futuring opens spaces and supports opportunities for adults to engage in learning activities that address historical and layered forms of oppression. Building on learning needs of adults to create meaning and make a difference in the changing world around them, especially during PNT, queer futuring strategies provide tools for activism, advocacy and building new relationships and ways of being-with others in a changing and uncertain environment.

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Corresponding author

M. Jayne Fleener can be contacted at: fleener@ncsu.edu

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