

# The Phoenix of Futures: Navigating the Productive Paradox of Futures Methods in Neoliberal Education

Jo Turbitt

*College Development Network, the United Kingdom*

## Abstract

This autoethnographic study, presented as a hybrid academic narrative, critically evaluates the emancipatory potential of Futures methods within an education system dominated by metrics and neoliberal ideology, referred to as the 'Dark Arts'. Employing a mixed-methods "Labyrinth" framework, the research utilises Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), the Futures Triangle, and Speculative Design to explore the central question: To what extent do Futures methodologies disrupt or reinforce dominant narratives within a measured system, and how does this shape a practitioner's sense of agency? The methodology gathered qualitative data through reflective journals and quantitative data via self-assessed agency/hope scores and Rotter's Locus of Control questionnaire. Findings revealed a "productive paradox". Futures methodologies do not inherently disrupt or reinforce constraints. Rather, they amplify existing intentions and contexts. When utilised uncritically or "co-opted by the system," they produce "old wine in new bottles", merely reinforcing metrics. However, the critical and reflexive application of these methods allowed the surfacing and challenge of deeply embedded systemic constraints. Crucially, the study suggests a shift in personal agency, moving from navigating individual survival toward "architecting resistance" against performative norms. This transformation informs a key possibility for future study: the development of a training module for college staff to build capacity and confidence in utilising Futures methods critically, advocating for "realistic cultural resistance acts" and embedding play, creativity, and imaginative skills to challenge institutional constraints. The research calls for scaling this inquiry to foster collective, values-aligned Futures praxis across the education sector.

**Keywords:** Agency; Creative Thinking; Disruption; Hermeneutics; Hope

