

Infinite Futures

Dr. Wendy Schultz



Dr. Schultz is the founder of the [Infinite Futures](#) consultancy. The focus is on process workshop design, facilitation, and documentation, while exploring change and future possibilities. Facilitating *futures fluency* is the goal.

Schultz defines futures research this way: "Futures researchers track technical innovations, value shifts, geopolitical tides, environmental perturbations, economic developments, demographic patterns, and other trends of change. From these data they create scenarios of possible alternative futures, which are then used as contingencies within strategic planning. Working as facilitators, futures researchers

can help communities and organizations envision their preferred futures and compare those visions with current trends and scenarios of possible futures. The process leads to practical planning and policy-making."

Methods

Infinite Futures methods include techniques to identify and track change and to paint pictures of future possibilities using scenarios.

Incasting (or scenario incasting), developed at the [Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies](#), involves creating the specific details of a possible future based on a general scenario description. "Incasting begins with an array of possible alternative futures: several different scenarios, all based on observed trends and emerging issues in society, the economy, technological innovation, the environment, and political activity." The basic assumptions of each scenario are assumed as true. Incasting participants experience what life is like in each scenario.

Incasting presents possible alternative futures using images and written scenarios. In Classic Incasting, the generic form of the exercise, one of five different scenarios (possible futures) is distributed to a group of workshop participants. The participants are required to accept the fundamental assumptions of the scenario they receive.

The Classic Incasting scenarios are:

- **Continued Growth** is a future in which the global economic system becomes more and more efficient and effective at mass production, distribution and marketing: the extreme outgrowth of the global mass media / consumption trends.
- **Decline and Collapse** describes a future of global breakdown: economic, political, and environmental.
- **Sustainable Development** (a.k.a. **Green Future**) emerges from the growth of environmental values and ecological concerns worldwide.
- **Disciplined Society** emerges from worldwide trends in political extremism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and fundamentalism.
- **High Technology** assumes that the innovations on the horizon in the late 90s have flowered into a variety of applications, both commercial and personal, that completely overturn our concepts of normality.

Each subgroup then describes the characteristics of the world depicted in its scenario — e.g., work, commuting, health care, leisure activities, education, crime, etc. After forty minutes, each subgroup uses a collection of headlines to report to the whole workshop. The headlines or any other illustration are in a format and a dissemination technique that is consistent with the scenario.

Dr. Schultz has also used different versions of incasting with specific organizations -- for example, [the Environmental Protection Agency's Community Risk Assessment](#) program, [Special Libraries Association](#), the [National Public Health Leadership Development Network](#), and the [Pacific Coastal Zone Management](#) group.

Scenarios

Scenarios are descriptions of possible futures based on a rigorous analysis of the past and the present plus a healthy dose of imaginative construction. Dr. Schultz includes four scenario development techniques with case examples for two of them –

- [Maximizing Difference](#), the Manoa/Infinite Futures approach
- [Maximizing Focus](#), based on an approach by Peter Schwartz, the Royal Dutch Shell Corporation, and the Global Business Network (GBN)
- [Maximizing Depth](#) based on Sociovision by Joop De Vries
- [Maximizing Development](#) based on Willis Harman's *An Incomplete Guide to the Future*

Visualization

Methods exist to break away from the present and from the assumptions behind straight extrapolation and help create alternative futures scenarios.

[Experiencing the Needs of Future Generations](#): a visualization exercise in '*visionary futures exploration*' - the use of imagination and intuition to discern transformational future possibilities and their implications for present-day values, attitudes, policies and decision making. A 'guided cognitive imagery' script is presented which, when read aloud, takes the hearer on a journey to different time periods, both past and future. The journey ends by having the participants first scan back across all the time periods they visited, so as to get a more global sense of perspective on what is truly most important; and in response, to imagine sending a message from the future back to the present regarding, '*What future generations need from us.*'

[Visualizing a Preferred Future](#) (visioning): is a visualization script for facilitators. The facilitator guides a group to explore and describe a future at an established time in the future, e.g., 30 years from now. After 15 minutes exploring that future date, participants draw, diagram, or verbally summarize their vision for an area of interest that they had previously chosen.

[Group Vision Exercise](#): Set 30 years ahead, the method guides a group from the personal to the community to the world. In Step One, each person creates individual goal statements. Step Two involves visualizing that future aligned with the goal statements. In Step Three, individuals share their visualized future with the group.

