

“Tune up your 'Futures Thinking Vehicle' for  
Imagineering in Ireland“

Natalie Dian  
Visionscentret Framtidsbygget AB  
Kungsladugårdsgatan 106 A  
414 76 Göteborg, Sweden  
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## “Tune up your 'Futures Thinking Vehicle' for Imagineering in Ireland“

This paper discusses the need for a mental “vehicle” for understanding and working with others in a time period when rapid change is the rule rather than the exception. With this rapid change, we need to give people structures for reflection and tools for analyzing consequences. We need to consider the role of those who want to slow or stop change. They need to understand changes’ inevitability and their role as quality controllers of change. We need to consider those who welcome change and validate long-range thinking. Long-range thinking needs the same status and energy that we give to being action oriented and putting out the fires of the day. We need to help them understand why others are hesitant and even fearful of change.

The word technology and the word future are often used as synonyms. It is by far not the only area increasingly fast change is affecting. Social services, health care, transportation, migration, family constellations are all under the pressure of change. All of these areas and many more make up our world. We need to understand how all the parts work together. We need to understand ourselves in relation to the future and change. Because there are different approaches, those differences are the basis of conflict and confusion.

The Futures Styles Inventory<sup>i</sup>, which this article describes, was born to help meet these needs. The pieces were already in place. Everett M. Rogers, Chair of the Department of Communication & Journalism at the University of New Mexico described in his classic book *Diffusion of Innovations*, the concept of “innovativeness and adopter categories.”<sup>ii</sup> The adopter categories are “the classifications of members of a social system on the basis of innovativeness, the degree to which an individual or other unit of adoption is relative.”<sup>iii</sup> The five categories are: venturesome innovators, respectful early adopters, deliberate early majority, skeptical late majority, and traditional laggards. Rogers work has been applied largely to the field of marketing and infusion of technology.

A simulation called Innovation Diffusion Game.<sup>iv</sup>, created by Alan AtKisson, illustrated the process where by a group of people could be influenced to change their behavior while playing nine roll figures. While AtKisson was inspired by the work of Rogers, he applied his theory in a practical way, the simulation, in order that social change might be experienced and integrated. AtKisson directed his simulation to community workers working in communities which is reflected in his nine rolls:

Innovator – The progenitor of new ideas; leading edge thinker or inventor

Change Agent – The “idea broker” for the innovator

Transformer – The early adopter in the mainstream

Noisy Majority Mainstreamers – Busy with the basic of life.

Unwilling Laggard – Late adopter

Reactionary – Maintains vested interest in keeping things as they are.

Iconoclast – Silent partner to the Innovator, encouraging from behind

Spiritual Recluse – The monk, ascetic, poet, inspiration of many

Renunciate Curmudgeon – Person who hates society and lives outside it; hermit, solitary crank or criminal<sup>v</sup>

## **The six working parts of the “futures thinking vehicle”**

Rogers focused on marketing and innovation diffusion and AtKisson focused on community workers. There is a need to apply these underlying concepts to individuals and organizations. The Futures Style Inventory is meant to measure the “futures thinking vehicle” that each and every individual has within them. The plural form, futures is used because there is not one future to be revealed; only possible futures to be explored. While squirrels save seeds and nuts to assure their survival one winter into the future, only human beings can influence the future of the whole planet for hundreds of years to come. This creative and influencing quality in human beings in relation to the future needs understanding and discussion.

The “futures thinking vehicle” is made up of six functions. A vehicle (the combined effect of functions) is primarily built to drive forward in a direct line into the future. The functions, motors, drivers, gearshifts, wheels, steering mechanisms and brakes are the same. They make up different types of vehicles: trucks, motorcycles, scooters and cars. They have different speeds with which they move into the future and different motivation that stimulates the choice of them in the first place.

What are the six functions that make up a “futures thinking vehicle”? They are: Futurist, Activist, Opportunist, Flexist, Equilibrant, and Reactionist. To one degree or another we have them all within us. We can even see them in organizations. The role each of us plays in creating the future is dependent upon the working relationship between the six functions in our particular vehicle. Each of the functions is motivated by survival needs<sup>vi</sup>, but each accomplishes this in very different ways.

### **Futurist function**

The Futurist function has two sides. One side distinguishes between trends and fads, seeing trends far earlier than everyone else. It identifies trends prior to their breakthrough in the public media. This function is a neutral observer of what is happening in the environment around its vehicle whether it sees ice on the road, or fine weather. The other function of the Futurist is that which signals the consequences of those observations; possible crash or safe driving ahead. These signals are intended to increase our understanding of the possible future consequences of our inventions, behaviors and beliefs.

The Futurist function thinks in terms of 25 to several hundred years or longer. This function understands that trends have both a positive and negative character. It also understands that both chaos and order are a part of life. It facilitates and supports the development of best possible futures. The Futurist function always looks for perspective, trying to see the whole picture. It understands that complexity is a given. It is oriented primarily to the future.

The Futurist function, like all others, is driven by a survival instinct, sometimes even the survival of future generations. It is confident in contexts where the future is discussed and formed. The futurist function deals with issues that others don't see yet or don't have time for or don't value as important. It falls naturally to creating possible and desirable scenarios. In decision-making discussions this function finds it hard not to wonder what effect a given decision will have on related topics.

## **The Activist function**

The Activist function acts upon selected observations of the futurist which dramatically threaten survival, for example, of the environment. It determines a course of action and does everything possible to see to it that we slow down, speed up, drive with caution or come to a dead stop. The function works in a divided time frame. The division is between the need to propagate for instant change, all the while knowing that realistically many changes both technical and social take time. The Activist function tries to bring complex issues into focus and describes those issues in concrete terms so that people can understand them, relate to them and be inspired to do something about them. The Activist is often a specialist in one issue and the trends that affect it. In the case of vehicles the Activist's battle might realize itself in a fight for better fuels or more public transportation. This Activist function is not an observer, but a driven, well articulated force for a specific change. The Activist function tries to keep us from driving drunk or fights for better road conditions. The Activist function shares with the Futurist function, the ability to identify the consequences of a specific of behavioral trend. Tragic occurrences in the Activist field of interest are used to motivate a change in current inventions, behaviors or beliefs.

The Activist works both in the future and the present. It values action and sees the problem it has selected as central to survival. The Activist feels its solution will solve many other problems as well (a clean earth will mean better health, higher quality of life) and often doesn't see problems (closing of non-environmental businesses, loss of jobs, costs of clean-up,) which may arise as a result of this change as significant.

## **The Opportunist function**

The Opportunist driving force is found in surviving in the present. The Opportunist function tries to change the future by assuring that the present is as good as possible. Quick changing fads and short-term goals are often the venue of the Opportunist. There is a positive and negative side to the Opportunist as there is in all the functions. The positive Opportunist is also a good fund raiser for the Activists humanitarian cause. On the negative side, the Opportunist may be so focused on money that other concerns get no time or energy. The function doesn't attempt to solve the problems of the world, but contributes by doing the best possible for him/herself and those around them. The Opportunist expects that others will do the same. This is a linear oriented function which relates to one issue at a time. The Opportunist buys fuel for the vehicle at the best possible price and saves what is over in the garage for later use or sale. The consequence of highly flammable gas standing around escapes consideration. On the other hand, the vehicle will never be stuck on the road in the middle of the night with its gas tank meter pointing to empty. We need The Opportunist function to assure that things keep moving. A vehicle full of Futurists looking for fuel trends will not fill the gas tank.

## **The Flexist function**

The Flexist function also gets things get done, often administrative tasks like getting the oil and filters changed regularly. The function is grounded in the present, but is often curious about new innovations which can improve the survival capacity of the vehicle. These new innovations often come from The Futurist or the Activist. They need the Flexist who is the integrator of new ideas to swell the numbers of users to reach the critical mass necessary for change. The Flexist has the power to implement such change or deny it. As all the functions,

The Flexist is driven by survival. In the name of survival, the Flexist can become rigid and refuse to accept change. If it is a vehicle that runs well, it sees no need to upgrade to a newer model just because its newness.

### **The Equilibrist function**

The Equilibrist function sees survival as a matter of staying in balance. It doesn't always understand that this need for balance is grounded in an innate and unarticulated understanding of systems and how they work. The function contains an awareness of all the parts of the vehicle and strives to maintain the balance between them. Change is however an unavoidable characteristic of systems. What Equilibrists don't understand is that systems strive for a balance which never occurs. The wish of the Equilibrist is to keep things as they are even though they may not be perfect. The imperfections are known, and through knowledge and experience it is possible to avoid the worst effects of a systems bad side. No matter what type of vehicle, The Equilibrist will act to make sure that the status quo is alive and healthy.

The Equilibrist function works in the present. It is positive in that it keeps the vehicle running and negative in that it doesn't understand the nature of change. It only sees the need for replacement engines, new tires or brakes and when the battery runs dry. The thought of a new vehicle is difficult. What the Equilibrist does not understand is that re-placing one part will cause other unknown changes as well.

### **The Reactionist function**

This function plays an interesting role in assuring the survival. Most people usually see the Reactionist as a function that holds the organization from change and future development. This can be good and bad. It isn't hard to see why it is bad, harder to see the positive the Reactionist function contributes. This Reactionist function has the job of keeping the Futurist, and some times the Activist from getting out of hand. Change for change sake isn't always good. The Reactionist has his/her eye on the past, seeing the good and the secure in what worked and what is working still. The Reactionist function keeps a group or organization from throwing out the baby with the bath water. The negative Reactionist finds the unknown as more of a survival threat than the known (even if the known is not good for the vehicle.) The negative Reactionist might continue to use gasoline when viable alternatives are available. A positive Reactionist has an ability to ask critical questions at an early stage of a change process. The same Reactionist has a clear picture of history and an ability to learn from it, along with a pedagogical ability to draw parallels from the past which can be enlightening when creating the future. The Reactionist can ask questions like "Why should we adopt this change?" Does the proposed change support and reinforce existing core values? What will it cost to make the transition from the old way of doing things to the "new-fangled method? Is this "cost of transition" justified by the incremental benefits of what is being proposed?<sup>vii</sup>

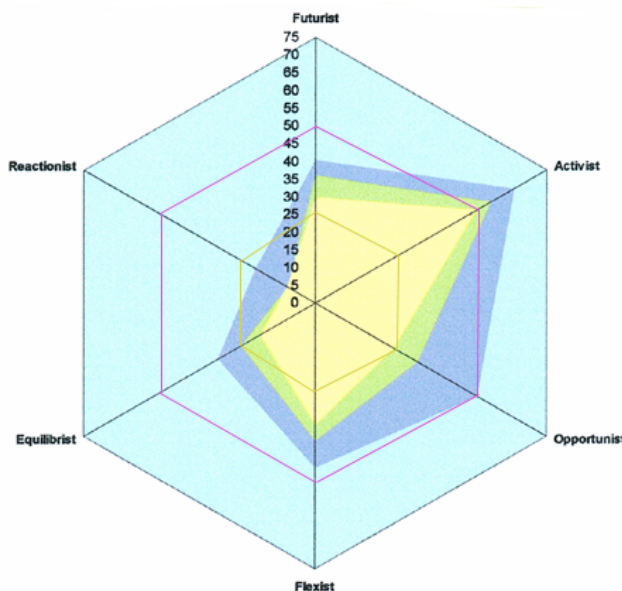
## When your “futures thinking vehicle” stalls....

Because a vehicle is a system, any stall or breakdown in the system is directly related to the relationships between the parts. Because systems are complex, so are our “futures thinking vehicles”. That is to say that the functions described above can be found in all of us simultaneously. When it comes to new technology, we might apply Futurists or Activists thinking. In other situations, accepting heavy piercing or tattoos, we might think more like Reactionists. When something originally sensed as odd and distasteful, like plastic surgery becomes more commonly accepted, Flexist can begin to make surgical changes in their bodies and feel good about it. We can relate to the future using any of our functions at the same time one style generally dominates. Our “futures thinking vehicle” may be a sports car, a bus, environmentally sound, or an antique.

Stalls and breakdowns happen when our dominate style bumps or crashes with others. When the Activist environmentally safe car collides with the Reactionist renovated pick-up, we know we have problems. When organization change is up for discussion, when new visions are created, this is the time for articulating ones position with colleagues. A specific case in point is a small county in Sweden which had an administrative staff that wanted to increase their futures competence. They wanted to be more long-term oriented. When we looked at the players in their system, particularly the politicians, it was clear they had completely different dominate pattern, one that inhibited any real change on the level that staff proposed. Staff, now knowing more about how functions and systems work, can form new strategies. Their frustration level had gone down as they understood and found new ways of working with their political counterparts.

### Analyzing which parts need oil and which need an overhaul

Human beings have a tendency to create us-verses-them environments where our thoughts become the truth and “they” become opponents who expresses an untruth. A discussion of vehicles or styles can lead to understanding and possibly new decisions that both sides can take pleasure in. When the functions of our “future thinking vehicle” are understood and can be seen in relation to one another, we can begin to see which need a little oil and which need an overhaul.



In the diagram we see the six “functions” of our “future thinking vehicle”. On it we see three different “future thinking vehicles” layered over one another against a light blue background. The **darker Blue** is a vehicle with a high Activist/Opportunist orientation. The least developed is the Reactionist. To keep from rushing into activities without having thought through them, **Blue** might overhaul its positive Reactionist. See Competency Development Chart below. In the **Green** vehicle, the Activist exercises most control and influence with almost no

Reactionist function and very little Equilibrant. An argument for competence overhaul in five functions could be made here. See Competency Development Chart below. In the **Yellow** profile all the scores are lower, showing a less dynamic style, with an Activist/Flexist/Futurist orientation. The three are present/future oriented and have very little past to give balance; another case for a futures competence overhaul. “Futures Thinking Vehicles” are not perfect when they come from the factory; there is always room for competency development. Styles can be improved even if the style belongs to an individual, a company or government agency.

### Guide for oil change and overhaul of our vehicles: Competency Development Chart

To be more of a: ↓	Individuals, companies, government organizations, NGO’s must develop more knowledge in:
Futurist	Values, Environmental scanning*, Trends & Trend analysis, Scenario writing, Systems thinking
Activist	Values, Goals, Consequence, Change process, Systems Thinking, Anatomy of a trend
Flexist	Values, Vision Identify current trends (vs. fads), Consequence
Equilibrant	Values, System Thinking Current Trends
Opportunist	Marketing, Anatomy of a trend (vs. fads), Values
Reactionist	Values, Visions, Goal setting Questioning change

\*Other terms used to describe the responsibility for information and knowledge-handling in a company are: knowledge management, competitive intelligence, business intelligence and information management. While they share overlapping interests, they have different orientations.

### Working with those who have other “futures vehicles”

If the “future thinking vehicles” **Blue**, **Yellow** and **Green**, were a working group in an organization, how might this group work together? The **Blue** vehicle would be out there advocating for opportunities that signal a new rising trend. The **Blue** vehicle has very little Equilibrant or Reactionist to hold him back. It is possible that he also has no hesitant Flexist either. But **Blue’s** colleagues are even less skeptical of change and may not complain, however their low Opportunist functions may have something to say if the new ideas are too oriented toward profit and lack any substantial change. Hopefully, there is some other part of the company that will balance out the enthusiasm of this group so that they do not become so

excited with their new ventures that they forget to align their projects with the goals of the organization. They might forget to anchor their ideas with administration, service and personnel departments.

As we have seen in the sample above, there is not always a clear dominate pattern to make life easy for us. However, if we, with **Blue** in mind, look at the following text, we can see some of the possible effects when two styles dominate. In **Blue's** case his activist is strongest. Blue is going to need to be very clear about his/her values in order to keep the negative Opportunist in check and the positive Opportunist functioning. See Activist/Opportunist.

When two individuals with differing and strong functions meet, the results can look something like this:

Futurist/Flexist – Flexists can learn much from the Futurist, but their tendency to see issues as unconnected to one another can contribute to feeling overwhelmed by the Futurist who easily makes associations from one topic to another.

Futurist/Equilibrist- The Futurist and Equilibrist meet when it comes to understand how things are linked and that one part is affected by other parts of a system. It is, however, necessary to build a common language first as the Equilibrist has this knowledge on an unconsciousness level. The Equilibrist needs to understand that change is inevitable and have a say in the change process.

Futurist/Reactionist - This is a delicate relationship with many different values and approaches to survival and change. The best approach for a Futurist is to meet the Reactionist critique head on and honestly. Reactionist need to phrase their critique in a way that gets the Futurist thinking, not defending.

Activist/Opportunist- The Activist and Opportunist can work together on projects that both are interested in. The Opportunist can often be an excellent fundraiser for the Activist. The Opportunist can also use the Activists cause as a gimmick for getting customers who believe in a specific cause (environmentalists for example) on their side.

Activist/Flexist- This is a very sympathetic relationship. The Activists needs followers and the Flexist is very glad to have the Activist clearly define the problem and present it with specific ways to combat or change the situation. Flexists like to “do” rather than discuss. Link this propensity to a cause they can believe in, they can do wonders.

Activist/Equilibrist- Activists and Equilibrists have a little trouble communicating. Equilibrists, who are in return, seen as roadblocks, see activists as somewhat radical. If the Activist can learn more about the balance needs of the Equilibrist, they can make a little headway.

Activist/Reactionist- This is one of the tougher relationships. Activists are advised to do the same as Futurists and meet the Reactionist critique head on and with respect.

Opportunist/Flexist- The part of the Flexist that is action oriented is drawn to the Opportunist because they get things done and done quickly; none of this waiting until some unnamed future. Opportunists get customers and helpers. In the best case Flexists can win financially from this alliance, at worst they can loose their life savings or pensions.



Opportunist/Equilibrist- There is one major meeting point between these two roles. If the Opportunist makes a case for increased income (which isn't hard to make as it is ongoing in most organizations) then the Equilibrist can be a strong supporter as income is such a basic need within the system.

Opportunist/Reactionist- The Reactionist is also receptive to the Opportunist when it comes to increasing income to the organization, as long as it doesn't involve major organizational change.

Flexist/Equilibrist- When Flexists and Equilibrists meet there are few radical disagreements, however their motivations are different and the Equilibrist need for balance is probably not understood, mostly because the Equilibrist has trouble articulating it for him/herself.

Flexist/ Reactionist- Part of the Flexist understands the Reactionist. Especially, if they are able to ask thought provoking questions of Activists and Futurists. If they give way to name calling and emotional responses it is difficult for Flexists to take them seriously.

Equilibrist/Reactionist- These two think they understand one another. They don't, as their motivations are different. However, they tend to work together against change and the other styles seeing them as a united group tend not to meet their objections in ways that will cause them to rethink their position.

## **Getting all the vehicles “Imagineering” with you**

Organization consultants and CEO's like to draw arrows going in different directions to represent members of an organization who sometimes get pulled in different directions. Then they draw another batch of arrows going in more or less the same direction as an illustration of the way the organization should work together. What is the magic that occurs between living people who are pulling in different directions to make them pull in roughly the same direction?

In a Goggle search, the quote “You can't change others, only yourself” was noted 17 times.<sup>viii</sup> From the Competency Development Chart we see that we can change ourselves by changing the interaction between the functions of our “futures thinking vehicle”. This vehicle is a little system. “The cooling system in a car, for example, may consist of a radiator, a fan, a water pump, a thermostat, a cooling jacket, and several hoses and clamps. Together they function to keep the engine from over heating, but separately they are useless. To do the job, *all* of the parts must be present *and* they must be arranged in the proper way.”<sup>ix</sup> The functions of the “futures thinking vehicle” can only act and be defined in relation to one another, separate they can do nothing to change or prevent change. A Reactionist has nothing to react to without the other functions. A Futurist has no future possibilities to share if there are no others to share it with (futurist talking to other futurist is stimulating, but no direct change occurs as a result).

All the functions operate under the same general principles as all other systems. They are the same, whether the system, a mouse, a company, a family or the change process. General Systems Theory investigates the principles common to all complex entities.<sup>x</sup>

While knowing is important, the secret is in keeping knowledge at hand and applying it, that is the difficult task. Being aware that our stance in a change situation is developed relative to the different functions within ourselves and relative to how others react is a difficult task.

There are positive rewards for this awareness:

- ❖ Knowledge that others are not “the enemy”, but persons with another style vehicle.
- ❖ Knowledge that someone can help define and clarify ones arguments for a specific action even if they are diametrically opposed to that action (ex. the positive Reactionist).
- ❖ Knowledge that there are no right or wrong actions, but actions that can take us nearer our goal or farther away.
- ❖ Knowledge that everyone is needed in the decision making process.
- ❖ Knowledge that change, for the sake of change, doesn't necessarily get us what we want.
- ❖ Knowledge that every change has its positive and negative effects, it is for us to prioritize them and choose which effect combination we think gets us closer to our goal.

There are also negative hinders to being “aware”:

- ❖ We can not blame any one single person for making a bad decision when we know that they are acting in accordance with their “futures thinking vehicle” (unless they have been unethical).
- ❖ Having to admit that someone that one disagrees with in principle might have a point that must be considered.
- ❖ We can not summarily dismiss those who are diametrically opposed to us in a change process.
- ❖ We feel the frustration of having both positive and negative results when we make decisions. Change is complex even though we desire a clear yes or no response.
- ❖ Change decisions take even more time if everyone's viewpoint must be listened to.
- ❖ The frustration of having to determine to what degree a change can be a benefit and to what degree it can be a detriment.

This paper has attempted to discuss the need for a mental “vehicle” for understanding and working with others in a time period when rapid change is the rule rather than the exception. It attempts to validate the idea that change is constant and necessary. In understanding our own “futures thinking vehicle” we begin to understand how others think. Knowing that our “futures thinking vehicle” has all the components of a change system opens the possibility of using that system and its inherent rules to come closer to getting the results we really want. Often people have the same goals, but it is their way of reaching them that causes confusion. Understanding our “futures thinking vehicle” means that long-term thinking, reflective thinking and short-term thinking must happen simultaneously as opposed to one at a time.

What was simple earlier is now complex. We can no longer get around it. In the field of Futures Studies we are constantly looking for practical tools that can help us handle and understand increasing complexity. The “Futures Style Inventory” is such a tool. However, it is still under development. Over two thousand individuals have taken it in Swedish and the same amount in English. It is time to go in and study the results and see if there is more learning we can gain for developing our “futures thinking vehicles”.

Attachment I

**Comparison of change categories with different applications**

<b>Innovativeness and adopter categories (Marketing application)</b>	<b>Innovation diffusion Simulation (Community change application)</b>	<b>Future Styles Inventory (Futures Studies Application)</b>
Venturesome Innovators	Innovator	Futurist
Respectful Early Adopters	Change Agent	Activist
Deliberate Early Majority	Transformer	Opportunist
Skeptical Late Majority	Noisy Majority Mainstreamers	Flexist
Traditional Laggards	Unwilling Laggard	Equilibrist
	Reactionary	Reactionist
	Iconoclast	
	Spiritual Recluse	
	Renunciate Curmudgeon	

The Futurist a person with all or some of the following qualities:

- is often a generalists or is interested in many subjects
- sees situations from many view-points
- is an observer
- understands that issues are not black and white
- is able to identify and understand trends early
- is able to see the relationships between trends
- has a strong personal vision which motivates him/her
- tries to explain connections and patterns
- articulates likely futures
- can point out both the negative and positive outcomes of a single situation
- is long-range in his/her thinking
- understands the role of chaos and order in life
- has a need to control and support positive development
- encourages change
- is oriented in the present and the future
- can see the value in delaying present gratification for future gain

Everett Roger's Earlier Adopters are described as:

- having more social participation
- having more highly interconnected in the interpersonal networks of their system
- being more cosmopolite
- having more change agent contact
- having greater exposure to mass media channels
- having greater exposure to interpersonal communication channels
- engaging in more active information seeking
- having greater knowledge of innovations
- having a higher degree of opinion leadership.

**Abstract**

This paper discusses the need for a mental “vehicle” for understanding and working with others in a time period when rapid change is the rule rather than the exception. With this rapid

change, we need to give people structures for reflection and tools for analyzing consequences. The Futures Style Inventory is a tool in process, meant to measure the "futures thinking vehicle" that each and every individual has within them. The theoretical background is presented along with the six functions of the "futures thinking vehicle". The paper gives ideas as to how individuals can fine tune their vehicle and how they can get it rolling in balance with other vehicles, or at least keep from crashing into them.

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<sup>i</sup> The Futures Style Inventory, <http://www.framtidsbygget.se/winindex.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> Rogers, Everett M., Dr., *Diffusion of Innovations, 5th Edition*, Free Press, 2003

<sup>iii</sup> Fortino, Andres, Course material, Masters of Science in Technology Management, Diffusion Innovations Glossary, George Mason University, Fairfax Virginia, 2002, <http://mstm.gmu.edu/mstm720/Articles/DifussionOfInnovationsGlossary.html>

<sup>iv</sup> AtKisson, Alan, The Innovation Diffusion Game, Version 1.1, Positive Futures, Bainbridge Island WA, 1990

<sup>v</sup> See Attachment 1 for a comparison of the three approaches to adopter categories.

<sup>vi</sup> Dian, Natalie, *Globalization - How and Why and the Future*, unpublished paper, 2000

<sup>vii</sup> de Jager, Peter, Resistance to change: A new view of an old problem, *The Futurist*, Washington, May/June 2001, [http://www.humboldt.edu/~campbell/p403rdg\\_orgchg2.htm](http://www.humboldt.edu/~campbell/p403rdg_orgchg2.htm)

<sup>viii</sup> Google search, <http://www.google.com/search?q=%22You+can%27t+change+others%2C+only+yourself%22&ie=ISO-8859-1&hl=sv&lr=>, August 2003.

<sup>ix</sup> Kauffman Jr., Draper L., Systems 1, *An Introduction to Systems Thinking*, The Innovative Learning Series. ed. Carlton, Stephen A., Editor, Future Systems, Inc. 1980

<sup>x</sup> F. Heylighen, C. Joslyn, (November 1, 1992): "Title", in: F. Heylighen, C. Joslyn and V. Turchin (editors): *Principia Cybernetica Web* (Principia Cybernetica, Brussels), URL: <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/SYSTHEOR.html>