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What Is ‘Futures Literacy’ and Why Is It Important?

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Feb 11 · 9 min read

On overcoming blind resistance to change and poverty of the imagination.

What does it mean to be *futures literate*? ‘Literacy’ originally referred simply to the ability to read and write, but today, the term covers a much broader range of both competencies and knowledge in specific contexts such as ‘financial literacy’ and ‘digital literacy’. For *futures literacy* the specific context is the human imagination, as the future can only be imagined. The ability referred to by the term ‘futures literacy’ is therefore the capacity to know how to imagine the future, and why it is necessary. Futures literacy enables us to become aware of the sources of our hopes and fears, and improves our ability to harness the power of images of the future, to enable us to more fully appreciate the diversity of both the world around us and the choices we make.

Explicit efforts to imagine the future date from ancient times, and were embodied in divination, prophecy, poetry, art and philosophy. More recently, studying the future became part of planning, arising from the desire to control tomorrow. Over the past 70 years, most efforts to think about the future, primarily undertaken by organisations and governments, has sought to manage the task by attempting to navigate uncertainty, make sense of complexity, and remain relevant to consumers and citizens. Or to put it slightly differently, to colonise tomorrow with the ideas of today. When such exercises took on a higher profile than mere everyday speculation, they provided an opportunity to invent and apply techniques such as ‘scenario planning’ and ‘horizon scanning’. The design and application of these tools has, for the most part, been undertaken by specialized practitioners known as *futurists*. Their role has been to assist with efforts to plan for tomorrow, usually by discovering or inventing possible, probable, and preferable futures, derived from assumptions based on past and present images of what the future may be like.

The culture, norms and discourses arising out of such attempts to plan the future, reinforced by generations of confirmation bias, have narrowed our assumptions about the future. They have limited our ability to imagine outside predefined paradigms, or to sense and make sense of phenomena that may not belong to pre-existing models. Imagined futures that do not arise from efforts to address what is currently deemed probable or desirable have no place in mainstream thinking. As a result, given the power that images of the future have over what we perceive and do, most novel phenomena remain invisible, bereft of meaning, because they are excluded from our images of the future.

Such reductionism may be encouraged by a bias in our brain's reward system called *present bias*, which is a release of dopamine that favours short-term payoffs over long-term rewards. Such reflexes may aid survival in certain circumstances, but they also reinforce socially constructed values, habits and systems that are preoccupied with instant gratification and short-termism. They may even be associated with forms of *temporal exhaustion* in which it becomes difficult to imagine what will happen beyond the next news cycle, the next election, or even the next meal. Social scientists have increasingly described how the accelerating pace of life and social change causes us to become alienated from the world we live in, to such an extent that individuals, businesses and governmental bodies are unable to embrace change.

This has to some extent caused us to turn a blind eye to the damage being done to our planet and the living entities with which we share it. Unable to grasp the fact that each moment of our present is an expression of our legacy, we end up, in the words of the philosopher Roman Krznaric, treating the future "like a distant colonial outpost devoid of people, where we can freely dump ecological degradation, technological risk, nuclear waste and public debt, and that we feel at liberty to plunder as we please". Millions of people marching in the streets, including young people whom we imagine still have many years to live, are calling for change now. It is fair to ask whether we have outlived our systems and our solutions, as our problems are demanding that we think beyond our own lifetimes. From a futures literacy perspective this is not the expression of a lack of confidence in those who may be born later — it is a call to live today in ways that are consistent with the values of freedom and resilience.

Futures literacy rests on the human mental faculty that enables us to imagine. It is a broad competency for understanding how and why humans make use of their capacity to imagine the future, it can be used in many ways, and it pre-exists our ability to walk or talk. It enlarges the field of future studies to include both planning and improvisation. It involves combining a broad palette of planning horizons and methods with what might appear to be a surreal or absurdist imagination, detached from deterministic purposes and methods. It asks us to focus on the theory and practice of anticipatory systems and processes as they are lived, in biological, ecological and evolutionary frameworks.

Futures literacy is available through *the discipline of anticipation*, which can be trained and refined to establish familiarity with the unfamiliar. The discipline of anticipation is the ability to become aware of assumptions about the future, and mastering it allows us to view uncertainty as a resource, rather than an enemy of planning. By imagining

different futures, individuals can become aware of their capacity to shape and invent new *anticipatory assumptions*, and the act of shifting this ability to anticipate from an unconscious to a conscious state is the start of becoming *futures literate*.

In 2012, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) began to focus on the development of futures literacy by exploring its attributes, while also demonstrating its crucial role as one effective way to anchor our understanding of the challenges we face in the conditions, hopes and fears of actual communities.

Working in the direction of democratisation towards the broader public, the goal of fostering futures literacy is to enable people to shape their own imaginations through the dreams and nightmares that arise out of the anticipatory assumptions they adopt in order to describe the future. The development of futures literacy builds upon UNESCO's decades of experience in fostering future studies, and its role as a global laboratory of ideas. UNESCO is co-creating futures literacy globally with local actors in more than 20 countries and has a proven track record in developing this capability. A diverse set of nodes in the growing Global Futures Literacy Network is championing innovative learning methods by working closely with partners in civil society, governments and the private sector. In December 2019 in Paris, UNESCO held the first *Global Futures Literacy Design Forum* to prepare the ground for a *Summit on Futures Literacy* to be held in late 2020 for the 193 UN member states. At the forum, the organization showcased a range of tried and tested techniques for integrating futures literacy into government activities. These included:

FUTURES LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: Under the leadership of Loes Damhof, Senior Lecturer in 21st Century Skills, UNESCO Chair in Futures Literacy, the Hanze University of Applied Sciences in Groningen, Netherlands has incorporated *futures literacy* as a capability in the curriculum for Master's students, and has developed training modules for the Master's faculty. Both students and teachers not only learn the capability, but also learn how to design and facilitate so-called Futures Literacy Laboratories in order to apply futures literacy in their studies and work. The Chair conducts research into the impact of teaching and training futures literacy, and the initial results indicate that by embracing uncertainty and complexity, students become more creative in developing strategies and increase their self-efficacy. By challenging thought patterns, futures literacy can change the conditions of change — an important requirement for guiding transition processes in society and businesses.

FUTURES LITERACY FOR INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSITY: According to Pupul Bishit, founder of the Decolonising the Future Initiative that uses storytelling as a tool for

marginalised voices in remote areas of South Asia, we are subconsciously committed to building singular images of the time yet to come by reproducing dominant ideas and values. This unintentionally contributes to the marginalization of those who do not fit into this image. She emphasises that more inclusive and better futures are not going to happen “until we acknowledge and recognize that futures for all cannot be imagined by a few.” This statement was followed by a round of applause, and she continued: “I’ve been traveling like a nomadic storyteller and futurist to people and places, but every place I went, and asked the communities ‘What is the future that you want?’, they said they had never been asked that question before. And that is why fostering futures literacy is so important.”

FUTURES LITERACY FOR REFUGEES: Epaminondas Christophilopoulos, Head of Foresight & Tools at the Foundation for Research and Technology — Hellas (FORTH), one of the largest research centres in Greece, has worked with war refugees on the island of Lesbos: “We need to give these people this skill to deal with a future full of uncertainties, and to emancipate them by helping them understand how we can anticipate and how we can use the future in the present to provide hope.” Realising that their usual educational methods would be difficult to implement in this setting, they explored how theatrical techniques could alleviate the situation of the oppressed. The reality of the team’s first futures literacy pilot project was a group of 40 participants aged from eight to eighteen, boys only, and with very limited knowledge of English. However, the theatrical approach proved to work, as the only way to communicate with more than ten different nationalities from Africa and Asia.

FUTURES LITERACY TO REDEEM COLONISATION: Bayo Akomolafe is the founder of the Emergence Network in Nigeria, a curator collective that aims to rethink our patterns of responding to crises. He said that the common impression of colonisation is about taking artefacts from the so-called global south to the global north and explained that the even more tragic loss was “the loss of a different idea and vision of the world. Colonisation was really about homogenization and mass production. It was also about the sterilization of hope, the failure of imagination, and the condensation of the manifold to a single story.” Bayo sees futures literacy as an invitation to see the world, to step away from the linearity of power, and to move away from the colonial incarceration of a single temporality.

FUTURES LITERACY IN POLICYMAKING: For Duncan Cass-Beggs, Counsellor for Strategic Foresight at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a futures literacy approach is crucial, as it is an essential part of responsible

policymaking: “You must explore alternative possible futures as a core ingredient to delivering responsible policy advice”. Duncan explains that since we cannot predict the future, our policies should be tested against plausible scenarios, including the very surprising and provocative ones, so that we are more likely to be ready: “It’s a very simple idea and yet it is in my experience still not implemented to the needed level. The good news is that there’s really a growing interest and understanding of the need, with several governments realizing that things are changing beyond their control, beyond what they’re prepared for. They are looking for answers, and I think that the futures literacy and strategic foresight communities have really important answers to give.”

Psychological studies have identified a correlation between the ability of individuals to imagine their future and their perception of success when the future finally arrives. Imagining the future is an opportunity space for humans to comprehend the formulation of desires towards their personal lives and careers. The better humans can become at understanding different explanations of and methods for imagining the future, the less reason there will be to fear the future, and the better they will be able to harness future opportunities and make sense of change and novelty.

In futures studies, which had its origin in government agencies navigating their uncertainties in the post-war period of the 1950s, and was later adopted by large corporations in volatile markets during the Cold War in the 1970s, it is likely that futures literacy will disseminate to an individual level. If the *discipline of anticipation* thereby becomes a tool that accompanies change, a vehicle to overcome the blind resistance to change and the desperation that induces poverty of the imagination, we see a task in the here and now for futures studies: It is time to explore and democratize the *discipline of anticipation*, in order to connect short and long-term time horizons in a sustainable trajectory for our species.

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Explore Futures Literacy further:

Open source book by Riel Miller, Head of Futures Literacy at UNESCO, 2018:
Transforming the Future - Anticipation in the 21st century

Global Futures Literacy Design Forum, December 2019:
Catalogue of learning-by-doing labs