FUTURES LITERACY: HOW TO DECOLONIZE THE FUTURE

December 8 – 12 2020. Tamara (Carleton) and I were at the

UNESCO Futures Literacy Summit

[Link] representing our research group – Foresight at Stanford [Link].

We are standing for design foresight and what we are now calling creative pragmatics (in our forthcoming book – [Link]). Competencies, tools and techniques, mindsets not for predicting the future, but anticipating the uncertainties, developing competencies for navigating complexity.

For us it started in the days of Stanford Humanities Lab back in 2005, when Bill Cockayne introduced me to strategic foresight, we researched technology trends, DARPA innovation, and a team of archaeologists modeled the future of mobility for Daimler Chrysler.

And there's an archaeological component. An archaeological perspective delivers hindsight, the past viewed from the standpoint of the present, working on what

remains, with a care for what is to become of the past-in-the-present.

Foresight requires hindsight – so that we are not held back by path dependency, the paths we have led so far, only being able to think in the terms of the past, so that we can imagine new futures, so we can use a deep understanding of where we have come from to decolonize and liberate the future.

This is more than holding that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. Why? Because we have a toolkit for mobilizing the past in future world building.

Foresight tools and techniques connect with speculative design. Pasts connect with open futures in conjectural archaeology!

(See also our JANUS Initiative [Link])

Here are some extracts from the summit literatures.

Futures Literacy – the need

Being futures literate changes what people see and do. From high ranking leaders in the public and private sector to activists, artists, students and professors, the Summit will show how people become futures literate and the impact it has on all aspects of life, from dealing with COVID-19 to breaking the reproduction of oppression.

Now, as always, the future is uncertain. Climate change, pandemics, economic crisis, social exclusion, racism, oppression of women, inter-generational conflict, and more, shatter the conventional images of the future that humans use to feel secure, to be confident enough to invest in tomorrow.

This is not a small problem. Without images of the future that inspire hope and foster collaboration there is a high risk of despair and war. The malaise of poverty-of-the-imagination must be overcome.

The question is how might we imagine the future?

Futures Literacy, a universally accessible skill that builds on the innate human capacity to imagine the future, offers a clear, field tested solution to poverty-of-the-imagination. UNESCO, in its role as a global laboratory of ideas at the cutting edge of human knowledge, has demonstrated that people and communities everywhere are capable of becoming more futures literate. This means they are able to use their imaginations for different reasons, using different methods, in different contexts.

Democratizing the origins of people's images of the future opens up new horizons in much the same way that establishing universal reading and writing changes human societies. This is an example of what can be called a 'change in the conditions of change'. A potent transformation in what people are able to know, imagine and do.

Futures Literacy is such a change. And it is happening now because the old ways of 'using-the-future' are no longer adequate given changes in both humanity's aspirations and tool enhanced capabilities. We want and can do more than ever. But as always this depends on being able to do so. Futures Literacy addresses the urgent need to transform human governance by empowering everyone to use-the-future more effectively and efficiently. This is not just about understanding how to prepare for potential crises or plan how to realise the important goals of Agenda 2030. It is about moving beyond a dependency on the illusion of certainty and the fragilities this creates.

2020 is coming to a close and no one can ignore that our current ways of using-the-future are inadequate. It is plain to everyone that the future cannot be controlled. That the illusion that we can determine what will happen actually leads us to build fragility and brittleness into everything we do.

Futures literacy – the power of the imagination

Now that so many images of the future no longer seem practical or desirable. Now that we are able to call into question the narrow, colonizing approach to tomorrow that has dominated thinking about the future for decades. It is time to recognize that by narrowing images of the future to efforts at improving the past we confine what we are able to see and do. What we see and do now is limited to continuity versions of the future.

In the same way that reading/writing illiteracy restricts and diminishes what we can understand and share, futures illiteracy cripples the power of our imagination. Constraining this powerful lens to only seeking planned and controlled tomorrows is like using a telescope to stare at your feet.

It may comfort us in the illusion that future is knowable – you see all the details of where you are standing. But it obscures and weakens the power of our imagination to enable us to escape from the lazy, automatic habit of just projecting the past – in one form or another – into the future.

Futures illiteracy makes it more difficult to take advantage of the creativity of a universe that is full of experiments and surprises. Futures illiteracy also makes it easier for the powerful to pursue and perpetuate their self-serving reproduction of the past.

Which is why Futures Literacy needs to be cultivated now. The climate extinction dead-end of modern industrial society, combined with the values that drive today's aspirations and the phenomenal tools that assist us to express our desires, set out the imperatives for significantly improving the universal human capability to use-the-imaginary-future. It is time to learn how to imagine the future for different reasons, with different methods, in different contexts. It is time to become futures literate.

In a futures literate world planning, making bets on the future, remains fundamental, anchored in the human capacity to assess probabilities and fix desired targets. But we need no longer stand on only this one leg. The human imagination is capable of breaking free from the tunnel vision of only seeking to impose today's visions on tomorrow. The novelty of each moment invites us to attempt to imagine the previously unimaginable. To liberate our perception of the present from the

constraints of yesterday’s best laid plans.

Freed from the need to be right, pick the winning bet, images of the future start to offer entirely new ways of seeing the present. Another limb joins the predictive, colonizing leg, a second balancing appendage that turns surprises into an invitation to demonstrate agility and improvisation. With two legs it is easier to appreciate a constantly changing terrain, to find the confidence and inspiration to dance.

Come learn to dance at the Futures Literacy Summit!

Let us change the way we use-the-future

2020 brought an unexpected opportunity: a powerful challenge to entrenched ways of thinking about the future. The pandemic shock, which has touched every single one of us in various and diverse ways, has allowed for a global experiment with uncertainty. This experiment unveiled a significant flaw in the way humanity uses-the-future today, and opened the door to put into practice new ways of thinking about, and using the future.

Last week, 8000 of you took part in the UNESCO Futures Literacy Summit – the largest virtual collection of work and ideas from experts in the field of Futures Studies and leaders from around the world. The event, which remains available online until January 11, opens up a vast horizon of different reasons and methods for imagining the future. Its objective was to provide you, as participants and contributors, learning voyages through close to 100 virtual exhibitions, conversations and statements from 40 global leaders, and hundreds of activities that explore different ways of thinking and using the future.

Why is futures literacy so important?

Our aim was for the Summit to convey that Futures Literacy is a universally accessible skill, and by becoming more futures literate, one can begin to build a less brittle, less fragile world.

A better understanding and a more conscious use of our anticipatory systems combined with collective intelligence, imagination, and experimentation, Futures Literacy enables dialogue and reveals our hopes and fears for the future, providing

the opportunity to nurture and confront them in novel ways.

Feedback has revealed the Summit's three key takeaways:

1. The skill that is called 'Futures Literacy' is an innate human capability that is accessible to everyone. This is because everyone, from a baby that cries to be fed to a chief executive building a strategic plan, is capable of imagining the future and of understanding the different reasons and methods that shape what we imagine. Like reading and writing, it is a skill that has the potential to fundamentally alter the way we see the world around us.

2. Futures Literacy is practiced in all communities, industries and sectors. UNESCO, in its role as global laboratory of ideas, has run over 80 'living labs' in over 35 countries and 50 different topics, that demonstrate that people can become more futures literate and that it changes in direct and practical ways what they are able to see and do.

3. By becoming more futures literate we can take a step, not only towards democratizing the powerful images of the future that influence our perspective and our actions, but also become able to change our relationship to the world and each other by better appreciating and inventing difference.

What the Futures Literacy Summit has shown is that it is possible to become futures literate and stop using the future for colonizing tomorrow and to start integrating a new point of view on the world that is not accessible from within the old paradigm.

So as the infamous year 2020 comes to a close, we could look at it as an inflection point, made possible by a confluence of conditions, a mind-blowing conjuncture, another striking demonstration of the creativity of our universe. Humanity is ready to embrace a fundamentally different relationship to the future. One that is consistent with a disruption already taking place in the basic meaning of human development. Instead of trying to dominate the future, we want to liberate it.

Capability as freedom.

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