


Future-Ready or Future-Blind?

Activating Futures Literacy Labs of Speculative Design Methods in Higher Education

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Abstract

Exploring how quality education can be reimagined to support the institutional, human, digital, and pedagogical aspects of learning in the coming decades.

What futures?

In an increasingly complex world, education can be seen both to shape the future and as part of a trajectory that has led us into growing global crises. Recognizing this dynamic and the fact that the educational landscape is rapidly evolving across technologies, generations, and institutions, how can we address the unknown futures of education? How can we envision new ways of teaching and perhaps futures that are positive (Hopkins, 2019)?

Guided by the concept of Futures Literacy (FL), we explore a microcosm of a Futures Literacy Lab, seeking to ignite curiosity and imagination among higher education educators in just 30 minutes. FL is defined as a capability of the skills needed to decide why and how to use imagination to introduce the non-existent future into the present (Miller, 2018). The suggested workshop was designed to be concise, focusing on the main message: You as an individual can develop the capacity to imagine as a tool to accelerate change (Miller, 2018). A question arose, though: How do the ways we think about the future influence our present, and how can educators actively apply this in their organizations? Miller offers a brief answer:

“The future does not exist in the present, but anticipation does. The form the future takes in the present is anticipation” (Miller, 2018 p. 2).

We aimed to use FL as a tool to describe and explore Anticipatory Assumptions (AA), such as how people use the future and make it explicit for participants. In short, actions that involve AA happen all the time in everyday life, like preparing for a trip or bringing an umbrella. Therefore, most people are unaware that they constantly engage with AA and that the future can be more than just a goal (Miller, 2018). This can lead to a narrow view of human agency, where people do not diversify their ways of thinking about the future, limiting their ability to move beyond probability and planning. It can also hide the complexity and ignore the fact that the world is always changing (Ibid.). By helping participants recognize their own AA and possibly broaden their perspectives on future thinking, we hope they become curious about complexity and explore ways to work with it, rather than just seeing it as a source of wicked problems and dystopias.

Guided by concepts of FL and speculative design research methods (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; 2024), we adopted an anticipatory systems perspective as the starting point for our workshop called “The Red Pill or the Blue Pill”. This article offers a brief overview of the workshop's background, its development, and reflections on future directions.

Futures Literacy Lab in 30 minutes or less

The workshop was part of a larger educational conference focused on professional development in the educational sector. We participated in a track with 50 attendees for 30 minutes. The workshop aimed to start bridging the critical gap in our understanding of how to support and develop future-oriented institutional pedagogical models and teaching philosophies (Ruge et al., 2023).

The main goal of the research related to this workshop is to explore how quality education, as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4, can be reimagined to support the institutional, human, digital, and pedagogical aspects of learning in the coming decades. As part of this research, we also participate in an international network of universities working to build capacity in this area. In the workshop, we aimed to share this work and explore "wishful educational futures" through speculative design research methods (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; 2024). Here, we invite participants to imagine the future of higher education in 2050.

In designing the workshop, we employed a three-tiered approach.

1. Kickstart the learning process and make anticipatory assumptions explicit
2. Provide some theoretical background and design examples
3. Reflect with participants and encourage them to attend a complete Futures Literacy Lab.



Kickstarting a workshop through Speculative Design Methods

Our first goal was to find a way to make AA explicit or observable to the participants. FLL should involve participants with an expressed appetite for innovative thinking, and we risk that the general workshop attendees might be reluctant to participate or find the exercise silly. Are they prepared to use their imagination on short notice, without forewarning? To set the scene and create a safe, imaginative space, we aimed to disrupt the routine of thinking about the future (and attending a conference). After some discussion, we decided to dress up as time travelers (see picture) from the future and use artifacts to ease the tension of predicting the future and spark imagination. Without lengthy explanation or introduction, we equipped participants with 3D glasses from the future and asked, “How do you think education looks in 2050?” After a few minutes of reflection, we asked, “How do you hope education looks in 2050?” We told participants they could take a hope-pill (VIKS drop) from the table, which would help them envision a more utopian future in 2050. They were invited to write their hopes on small business cards and share them in groups. The purpose of the glasses and pills was to break their routine of thinking about the future and kick off a learning process that could serve as the foundation for our mini-Futures Literacy Lab. Inspired by Miller and the metaphor.

“To nurture the futures literacy lab without a kick-start is like a chemical lab without a catalyst” (Miller, 2018, p. 98).

The main goal of the exercise was to help participants distinguish between expectations and hopes – the likely from the desirable – and extending the timeline to 2050 allowed for broader thinking. Of course, this requires a longer process, and our quick introduction and workshops were described as a FL tapas, meant to spark interest and perhaps inspire further exploration in the area. We aimed to leave them with a basic understanding that you use the future in the present and that complexity can be an asset rather than just a threat. The participants responded warmly to our invitations and engaged actively throughout the first session, with everyone using glasses and mostly taking the pill.

Afterward, we transitioned to the more traditional part of the workshop and provided some background on what had just occurred.

Background on Futures Literacy

We started by thanking the participants and explaining our goal to help them distinguish between hope and expectations, emphasizing AA. We aimed to make their assumptions explicit to reveal the factors shaping the futures they envision when they engage in dialogue with each other. Hopefully, we gave them an “aha” moment and made them a little unsure about their ability to use the future, as well as how our AA can be implicit—affecting much of what you observe and do—but remaining unseen. Futures Literacy Labs are one way to make the invisible visible.

We used the umbrella example to illustrate the dominant anticipatory system—anticipation of the future. The future as a goal or a planned goal that people rely on—such as taking an umbrella to be prepared if it rains—these anticipatory skills are crucial for daily activities, but people often don’t realize they are constantly predicting future events (Miller 2018). From this, we made a connection to a common AA, specifically the belief that education is the best steppingstone for tomorrow’s jobs (Ibid). We engaged with the participants and asked whether we can even imagine learners or learning environments in 2050.

Additionally, we introduced the Futures Cone (see Gall et al., 2022) as a conceptual tool to help participants discuss potential utopian and dystopian futures. The Futures Cone aligns with ideas from Gümüşay & Reinecke (2024), encouraging us to go beyond past empirical realities to imagine and explore future possibilities. During the session, we also linked these ideas to various key competencies, including those suggested by UNESCO (Rieckmann et al., 2017) and the European Union (Bianchi et al., 2022). These transversal competencies are recommended across educational fields, but not all are fully implemented. Futures Literacy is listed as a key competence in both sets, and our workshop served as a steppingstone for how educators can practically work with it, as well as inspiration for future classroom application. Our main goal was to encourage participants to explore diverse visions of the future rather than debate who is right. Hopefully, the red hope-pill helped them to be a bit more playful when discussing futures.

Reflections: Co-creating Visions for the Future(s)

By the end of the workshop, we engaged in open reflection and dialogue about the exercise and FL. The participants told us it was a challenging activity, and it was clear that more time was needed. However, they showed a strong interest in a longer format and intergenerational cooperation. They believed students should be active participants in an FL lab, co-creating visions for the future. A sample from the future business cards reflected this sentiment, along with hopes for less complexity and more equality (Author translations).

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- *Equality in the way we view knowledge (For example, craftsman vs. academic)*
 - *Genuine participation*
 - *Choice*
 - *Influence*
 - *Activity*
 - *Student involvement across education*
 - *Community drives the “call”*
 - *Formation (Bildung) of the individual human*

- *Profession's authority*
 - *Do we have enough knowledge now?*
 - *That the future is simpler*
 - *Flexibility*
 - *Work life*
 - *Career*
 - *Wholeness for all*
 - *Equality for craftsmen and academics*
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Take-away from the workshop

Discussing the workshop afterward, several key points became clear. Running another workshop with limited time, we would tighten up section 1 a bit. Contextualization is essential, so rather than imagining education in 2050, we would focus on specific sectors, classrooms, educators, and so on.

Additionally, we would ask participants to write 2-3 bullet points on their business cards first, both to help them envision futures to share with the group and to give us more empirical data to review afterward.

We fully agree with the participants that when working with futures and imagination, more time is needed. This likely also applies to other settings—time to reflect, imagine, and work with futures in education is needed, as these influence our present. Interestingly, we noticed that the participants and facilitators already possess a lot of knowledge. Therefore, the challenges of facilitating Futures Labs might not be generating new knowledge but rather mobilizing what participants already know. The key questions are how to act, how to make an impact, and how to imagine better futures for everyone.

Our advice for future time travelers wanting to try this out is:

- 1) Engaging in FL takes time and effort – but it can also be fun and creative; engage your hyperdrive.
- 2) Strong facilitation is essential when working with futures thinking for impact and outcome – try to implement activities where you can gather empirical data for the group and articles.
- 3) FL and AA offer valuable tools for Futures workshops – explore different frameworks and tailor them to your contexts.

We leave you with one question: do you only think about **the** future, or do you truly consider **all our futures**?

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