


Introduction to Special Issue

Future-oriented Pedagogies in Practice: Innovation and Agency

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The article is peer-reviewed and part of the Special Issue of SITE:
Future-oriented pedagogies in practice: Innovation and agency

Published April 2026

Abstract

Introduction to the special issue that addresses the role of education in these unruly times, and how we can develop future-oriented pedagogies that promote innovation, imagination, action, and hope.

In 1992, political philosopher Francis Fukuyama published the book *The End of History and the Last Man*. In this book, Fukuyama argued that Western liberal democracy was a universally superior form of government. As it spread across the world following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fukuyama believed that humanity had reached its absolute peak and end point in governance. Therefore, the future appeared to be settled, with this form of government continuing to dominate for the rest of history, thus signifying the end of history itself—at least according to Fukuyama at that time.

In 2026, the future can no longer be reduced to a single, pre-determined outcome. Instead, multiple futures exist simultaneously, as what is to come feels both strangely inevitable and unpredictable at the same time. On one hand, it seems that human history is nearly destined to end, not because of better governance, but due to a global inability to re-imagine and address issues like climate change and mass biodiversity extinction. On the other hand, societal changes are happening faster than ever before. This includes shifts in geopolitics, warfare, and technological advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI), which both excite and unsettle us.

What is the role of education in these chaotic times, and how can we develop future-focused pedagogies that foster innovation, imagination, action, and hope? With this special issue, we have invited contributions that address exactly this question. The papers are published in brief, 2-5 page formats designed to inspire both researchers and practitioners. They offer theoretical perspectives on challenging our underlying assumptions about the future—or even exploring multiple possible futures.

Additionally, they include methodological examples from practice, examine online teaching formats, philosophy, eco-critical literature, lesson plans, campus initiatives, and educator workshops. Several of the articles are creative in their format and go beyond what is typically considered academic literature.

We intentionally included these innovative approaches in our special issue, recognizing that the complex problems the world faces demand new solutions across all fields. As a reader, you are invited to embark on a journey with a self-aware time traveler. You can join the cartoon character Body as he struggles with an inactive, disconnected modern lifestyle, or find peace and tranquility in a lush permaculture garden where connections between people and the environment are fostered through joyful engagement.

We present the SI as a double issue compiling both articles in Danish and English. We are extremely grateful that the topic of future-oriented pedagogies has gathered an international audience ranging from countries such as Canada, New Zealand, the USA, Germany, and Malaysia.

Journal of Social Innovation & Transformative Entrepreneurship Education (SITE)
Year 2, Issue 1, 2026

Table 1. Articles in the Special Issue ‘Future-Oriented Pedagogies in Practice: Innovation and Agency’

Article	Language	Author(s)	One-sentence abstract
Introduction to Special Issue: Future-oriented Pedagogies in Practice: Innovation and Agency	English	David Thystrup Mehlsen, Jeppe Kiel Christensen & Michael Breum Ramsgaard (Editors of SI)	<i>Introduction to the special issue that addresses the role of education in these unruly times, and how we can develop future-oriented pedagogies that promote innovation, imagination, action, and hope.</i>
Falling in Love with the Future: Reflections from a Time-Travelling Educator	English	Sebastian Planck	<i>Explores the lived experience of facilitating speculative design workshops in entrepreneurship and sustainability education through a dialogic structure that moves between the internal monologue of an educator navigating fear, uncertainty, and self-doubt, and scholarly explanations of SD's history, methods, and pedagogical implications.</i>
Implementing Work-Integrated Learning: A Student-Run Café Initiative	English	Fayrene Chieng	<i>This case narrative shares the journey of implementing a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) program through a student-run café kiosk at a Malaysian University, drawing from personal experience, observations, and student reflections.</i>
International Perspectives on Systems Thinking Pedagogy: Reflections on the Global Polytechnic Alliance’s Virtual Learning Project	English	Elinor Bray-Collins, Machiko Niimi, Simon Swale, Martin Storkholm Nielsen, Brian Mandeville, Isabel Sousa, Sara Hassan, Angus Lewry & Caroline McCaw	<i>Reflects on six years of collaborative teaching between faculty from polytechnics in Canada, New Zealand, and Denmark examines how systems thinking functions both as an analytical framework and a pedagogical practice in our international, online classroom.</i>
Future-Ready or Future-Blind? Activating Futures Literacy Labs of Speculative Design Methods in Higher Education	English	Jeppe Kiel Christensen & Michael Breum Ramsgaard	<i>Explores how quality education can be reimagined to support the institutional, human, digital, and pedagogical aspects of learning in the coming decades.</i>
Pedagogy for Hopeful Futures: Reimagining Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education	English	Stephanie E. Raible, Juliana Pattermann-Gunsch, Julia Vögele & Desiree Wieser	<i>Introduces hopeful futures as a pedagogical orientation that connects futures literacy with students' agency and capacity to act, defined as desirable imaginaries regarded as possible and actionable, integrating plural understandings of futures with hope as agency for intentional change.</i>
Unlearning Cynicism: Rewriting Futures in Sustainability Education	English	Francisco C. M. Aragón-Guiller & Stephanie E. Raible	<i>Examines the cultural and psychological roots of student cynicism, including its links to grief, frustration, mental health consequences, and highlights its detrimental effects on learning and agency.</i>
What if We Learnt Like a Garden? Learning Collective Agency through Permaculture	English	Anne Schlieker, Maribel Blasco & Albina Dioba	<i>A glimpse into a learning experiment prototyping a pedagogy for the future, designed to foster resilient collective agency through maximizing beneficial relationships in nature.</i>
Bricks of Transformation: A Future-Oriented Pedagogical Approach to Systems Thinking with LEGO Serious Play	English	Maria Mair, Researcher & Laura Bechthold	<i>Introduces an innovative educational workshop designed to bridge this gap by teaching Geels's Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) using the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) method.</i>
Sustainable Design and Digital Creativity in Foreign Languages: Learning Activities for Technological Pathways	English	Cristina Giorgiana Coromelci & Ioana Olteanu	<i>Presents an innovative pedagogical design implemented within the TEACH4SD project, aimed at integrating the GreenComp framework into vocational education and training (VET) for construction and woodworking manufacturing design.</i>
Introduktion til Temanummer: Fremtidsorienterede Pædagogikker i Praksis: Innovation og Handlekraft	Danish	David Thystrup Mehlsen, Jeppe Kiel Christensen & Michael Breum Ramsgaard (redaktører af temanummer)	<i>Introduktion til temanummeret, som undersøger uddannelsens rolle i disse urolige tider, og hvordan vi kan udvikle fremtidsorienterede pædagogikker, der fremmer innovation, fantasi, handling og håb.</i>
Verden Kalder og Håbet - Arbejde med Håb, Forestillingsevne, og Utopier i Skolen med Afsæt i Den Tyske Håbsfilosof Ernst Bloch	Danish	Carsten Linding Jakobsen	<i>Kan en marxistisk håbsfilosof som Ernst Bloch, som levede i en anden tid, bidrage aktivt til pædagogisk tænkning med henblik på at fremme social retfærdighed og en bæredygtig udvikling anno 2026 og i årene frem?</i>
Vi Har Behov for mere Bæredygtig Adfærd – Hvor Finder Man Gode Råd om Bæredygtige Glæder?	Danish	Henrik Wøhlk Larsen	<i>Hvad kan vi lære om bæredygtig adfærd hos en professor i adfærdsdesign, en japansk oprydningseksper, en italiensk økonom, Mr. Bean, en sejlsportstjerne, Julius Cæsars arkitekt eller en glad gammel svensk gubba?</i>
Grøn Litteraturredidaktik Kan Fremtidssikre Danskfaget Uden at Fragte Eleverne Livsmod og Håb for Fremtiden	Danish	Birgitte Greve Madsen	<i>Undersøger hvordan grøn dannelse og grøn litteraturredidaktik kan bidrage til at fremtidssikre danskfaget i folkeskolen.</i>
Når Kroppen Mister Sin Natur	Danish	Birgitte Woge Nielsen & Peter Keller Hansen	<i>Undersøger, hvordan menneskekroppen, oprindeligt skabt til bevægelse og sanselige oplevelser, er kommet i konflikt med den moderne livsstil, der er præget af stillesiddende adfærd, kunstige omgivelser og medicinsk afhængighed.</i>

The article **Falling in Love with the Future: Reflections from a Time-Travelling Educator** by Sebastian Planck examines how speculative design methods can be applied in an educational setting, as the author takes students on a journey through time to a post-apocalyptic future. The paper alternates between auto-ethnographic accounts of the uncertainties educators face when working with non-traditional methods and theoretical insights into the potential of speculative design.

The article **Future-Ready or Future-Blind? Activating Futures Literacy Labs of Speculative Design Methods in Higher Education** by Jeppe Kiel Christensen & Michael Breum Ramsgaard has a similarly experimental scope. Through examples and reflections on a workshop for higher education educators that also involves time travel (and 3D glasses from the future), the reader is introduced to the concept of Futures Literacy Labs. They demonstrate how this approach can disrupt and challenge our somewhat bleak anticipatory assumptions about the future and instead encourage hopeful perspectives on multiple possible futures at once.

Hope is also significant in the paper **Pedagogy for Hopeful Futures: Reimagining Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education** by Stephanie E. Raible, Juliana Pattermann-Gunsch, Julia Vögele, & Desiree Wieser. The authors examine four social innovation and entrepreneurship competence frameworks, considering how they explicitly or implicitly address hope and futures literacy. Through this analysis, they highlight the potential of approaches like the previously mentioned Futures Literacy Labs. Similarly, they argue that this creative method can make the future available for exploratory investigation. The goal is to shift away from a singular, pessimistic future toward a range of adaptable, negotiable futures.

While all these contributions focus on expanding our ideas of what the future (or futures) might be, the article **Verden kalder og håbet - Arbejde med håb, forestillingsevne, og utopier i skolen med afsæt i den tyske håbsfilosof Ernst Bloch** by Carsten Linding Jakobsen looks to the past to inspire hope for the future. The paper begins with a real-life teaching experience that many educators might relate to. A student asks, "Is there hope?" after a class discussion about the climate crisis and war. Linding Jakobsen traces back to Ernst Bloch's Marxist philosophy of hope and offers examples of times when societies have shown signs of alternative, sustainable organization. Could hope for the future be found here?

Using nearly the same vantage point as Linding Jakobsen, the article **Unlearning Cynicism: Rewriting Futures in Sustainability Education** by Francisco C. M. Aragón-Guiller & Stephanie E. Raible begin with a paraphrase of the author's students: "*With the way things are going, what chance do we stand of solving this?*" They demonstrate how education can help learners unlearn cynicism through reflexive exercises, making way for more constructive and hopeful critical thinking.

Vi har behov for mere bæredygtig adfærd – Hvor finder man gode råd om bæredygtige glæder? by Henrik Wøhlk Larsen is anything but cynical in its approach to sustainability and the future. With humor and warmth, the author asks how several contemporary and historical figures—ranging from an ancient Italian architect to Mr. Bean to Marie Kondo—would approach the same question: How can we develop a different relationship with the stuff around us to foster more sustainable consumption?

Another common theme in the articles is nature-connectedness. The article by Birgitte Greve Madsen, **Grøn litteraturdidaktik kan fremtidssikre danskfaget uden at fratage eleverne livsmod og håb for fremtiden**, examines this through a mono-disciplinary perspective, using the first language subject Danish as a vantage point. Here, she shows how green literature didactics can inspire hope and action by exploring emotional connections and relationships with the more-than-human world.

Other papers discuss the lack of connection with nature in modern society. The creative, cartoon-based paper **Når kroppen mister sin natur** by Birgitte Woge Nielsen & Peter Keller Hansen examines how our bodies have become stuck in today's inactive lifestyles. They combine a storytelling approach with findings from medical studies showing the positive effects of nature-based sensory stimuli and movement on mental well-being. The paper offers a creative way to explore how we can build future societies that allow room for both our bodies and nature.

This future vision appears to have already been realized in the paper **What if we learnt like a garden? Learning collective agency through permaculture** by Anne Schlieker, Maribel Blasco, & Albina Dioba. The paper presents short sensory vignettes of wandering through Permahaven – an urban permaculture garden on a university campus. These stories are intertwined with theoretical insights on fostering collective agency rather than perpetuating the trope of the lone, heroic entrepreneur. They argue that collective agency can be cultivated through a permaculture-inspired pedagogy.

Permahaven is not the only campus-based initiative in our issue. The piece **Implementing Work-Integrated Learning: A Student-Run Café Initiative** by Fayrene Chieng explores what happens when students take on the management of a campus café. Navigating uncertainty and challenges as they occur, the article demonstrates how powerful a learning-by-doing approach can be in future educational methods. However, simply giving students a café is not enough to unlock these potentials. Strong scaffolding and ongoing reflections between theory and practice are essential.

In the article **International Perspectives on Systems Thinking Pedagogy: Reflections on the Global Polytechnic Alliance's Virtual Learning Project**, we shift focus from the local campus to global issues and collaboration. Authored by Elinor Bray-Collins, Machiko Niimi, Simon Swale, Martin Storkholm Nielsen, Brian Mandeville, Isabel Sousa, Sara Hassan, Angus Lewry, & Caroline McCaw. The authors use Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), a method where students from Canada, Denmark, and New Zealand work together to map and address global systemic problems. Interdependence is central here. While analyzing and mapping connections in complex systems is important, the authors argue that this alone is insufficient. To successfully implement this virtual learning approach across continents, building relationships between both students and educators is essential.

Another article that actively explores new learning formats is **Bricks of Transformation: A Future-Oriented Pedagogical Approach to Systems Thinking with LEGO Serious Play** by Maria Mair & Laura Bechthold. The paper employs a large-scale Multi-Level Perspective Model to demonstrate how systemic change can occur in society while enabling students to engage in tactile, embodied

ways. Through metaphor-based building and storytelling, students use LEGO bricks to gain a hands-on and experiential understanding of systemic change.

Throughout this issue, the articles present rather unexpected approaches and combinations of theories and methods. This includes the paper **Sustainable Design and Digital Creativity in Foreign Languages: Learning Activities for Technological Pathways** by Cristina Giorgiana Coromelci & Ioana Olteanu. At first glance, the paper might look like a typical lesson plan, guiding the reader through learning activities, objectives, a sequence of activities, resources, and assessment formats. Surprisingly, the lesson incorporates both French poetry and creative AI to promote systems thinking and environmental awareness. The article's format offers a glimpse into how future lesson plans and curricula might be designed.

Specifically, this SI wanted to promote different formats for scholarly communication. Therefore, a set of different article formats was developed. We offer these to the scholarly community for future development, as we see much potential in disseminating academic knowledge in these short 2-5-page formats.

A. Debating contributions

- 1. Perspective reflection:** This is a short, personal, or professional take on a theme. The text opens with an idea or presents a thoughtful, analytical viewpoint without necessarily providing a conclusion. It is suitable for sharing a thought, experience, or observation that invites broader reflection.
- 2. Opinion piece:** This is a position-based text that invites discussion. It argues for a viewpoint and may be critical or provocative. Ideal for setting an agenda or challenging established thinking.
- 3. Critical commentary:** A short, analytical, and possibly provocative contribution. It challenges, analyzes, or comments on trends, ideas, or practices. Effective for sparking debate and reflection.

B. Teaching contributions

- 1. Practice insight:** This is a concrete description of a teaching situation, method, or experience. The focus is on the practical and the lived. Suitable for sharing insights from everyday teaching.
- 2. Didactic focus:** A focused contribution based on didactic considerations. The text analyzes or justifies choices in teaching design. Relevant for those who wish to highlight a pedagogical point.

3. Case narrative: A practice-based description of a specific teaching course or project. It combines storytelling and analysis, highlighting what was done and what was learned. Ideal for sharing experiences with colleagues.

4. Educational glimpse: A poetic and open format that offers snapshots from practice. The text may be atmospheric, sensory, or reflective. Suitable for capturing moments and moods in teaching.

C. Scholarly contributions

1. Mini-article: This is a neutral term signaling a short format. The text is informative and precise, without being overly detailed or opinion-based. Suitable for conveying knowledge in a compact form.

2. Methodological inspiration: A brief introduction to a method or approach. It explains how and why the technique can be used in research or practice. Ideal for inspiring new approaches in scholarly work.

3. Thematic impulses: Short contributions that open further thinking and dialogue. These are more idea-generating contributions and may pose questions or point to new research-informed perspectives. Suitable for initiating conversations or inspiring future work.

4. Scholarly notes: This is a more academic, sober, and research-based contribution. The text is factual and explains concepts based on research-supported knowledge, including references. Suitable for sharing scholarly insights in a short format.

D. Future-oriented contributions

1. Future fragment: This is a creative format that aligns with the special issue's theme. The text may be visionary, speculative, or imaginative, pointing toward the future. Ideal for rethinking and envisioning the education of tomorrow.

As editors, reading through these articles has felt like a journey into multiple hopeful futures.

We thank all the authors who contributed to this special issue and hope that this collection of short articles inspires innovation, action, imagination, and change.

Aarhus, April 2025, David, Jeppe, and Michael