

WHAT IS FUTURES
LITERACY AND WHY
IS IT IMPORTANT
FOR YOUNGSTERS?



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THE FUTURE
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For many of us, the future is a mysterious and intangible concept. While the word might evoke vivid and sometimes stereotypical images from science-fiction movies such as, flying cars, technological advances, teleportation,...

If we think about it, the future is not that far away, but something you use all the time. For example, you use the future when you choose to initiate or attend a Futures Literacy workshop with your community rather than, let's say a coding class: you are making certain assumptions on what will be an important skill to develop for your community, or for yourself in a close or far away future. This pamphlet will guide you through an introduction to Futures Literacy and the different ways you can use it.

1. WHAT IS FUTURES LITERACY AND WHO IS IT FOR?

The term “Futures Literacy” was coined by Riel Miller when he was in charge of futures activities at Unesco. It came from the recognition that (1) Everyone anticipates, but most people are not aware of how they do it, (2) The future exists only in our imagination, which means we can explore it in various ways. He wrote:

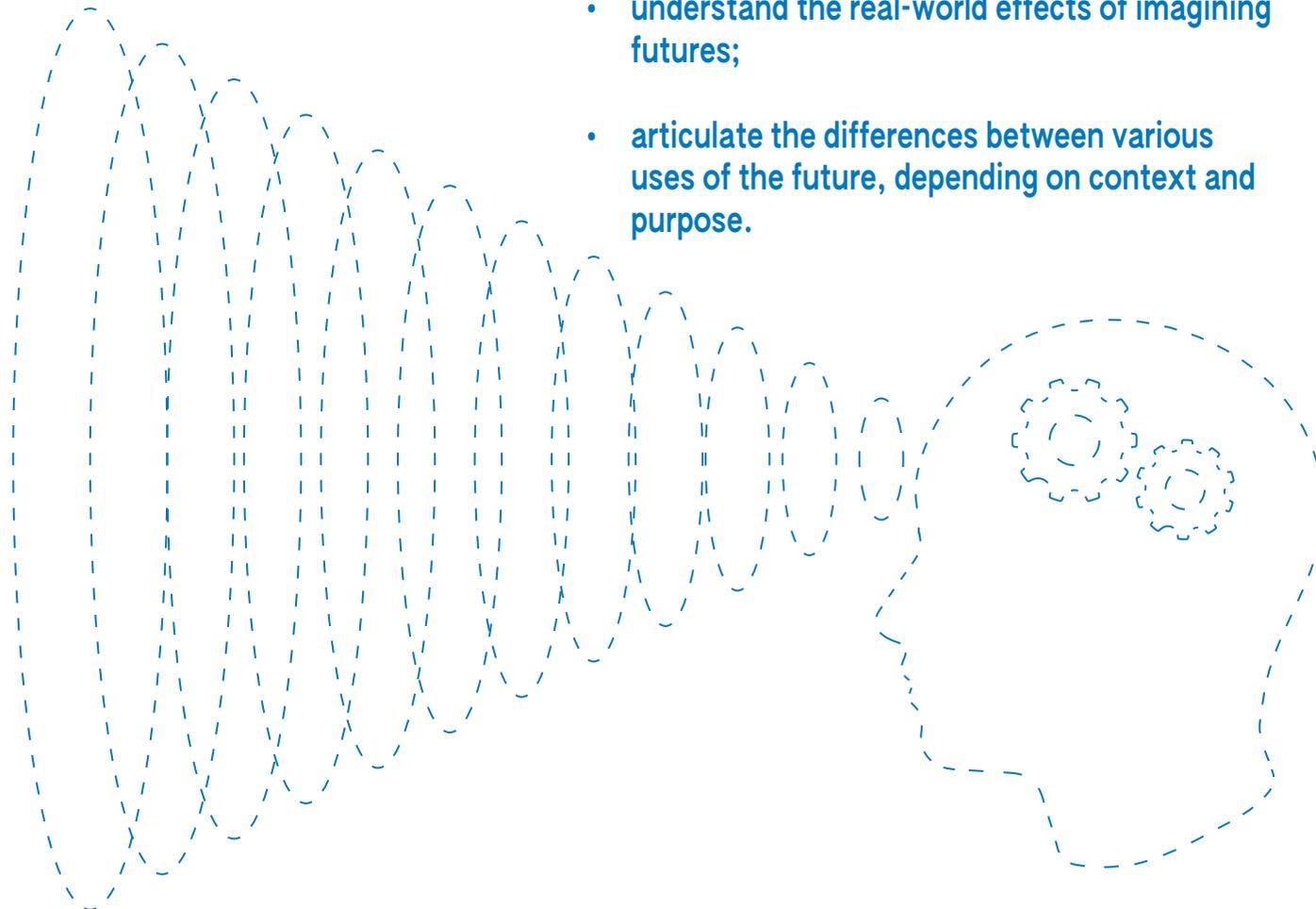
“Futures Literacy [FL] is a capability. It is the skill that allows people to better understand the role of the future in what they see and do. Being futures literate empowers the imagination, enhances our ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur.

The term Futures Literacy mimics the idea of reading and writing literacy because it is a skill that everyone can and should acquire. And it is a skill that is within everyone’s reach. (...)

Democratizing the origins of people’s images of the future opens up new horizons in much the same way that making reading and writing universal 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 for everyone. It does not require full mastery of any specific “futuring” technique but is rather an evolving set of skills and experiences, mostly learned in action. It allows individuals to:

- better understand the role that, through anticipation, the future plays in what they see and do;
- understand the real-world effects of imagining futures;
- articulate the differences between various uses of the future, depending on context and purpose.



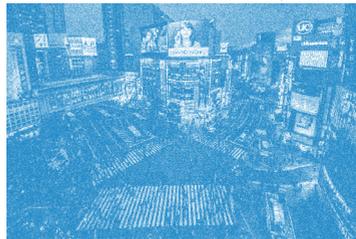
2. ANTICIPATION

WE ALWAYS ANTICIPATE

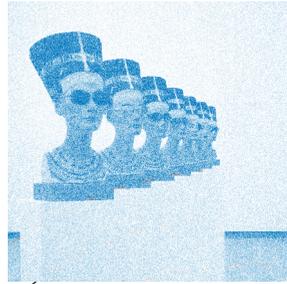
If we think about it, all our decisions are based on something called, in Futures Literacy language, anticipation: images of the future that we form in our conscious or unconscious mind.



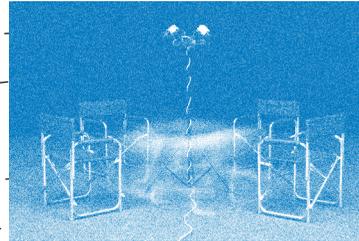
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Exploring Tokyo's Shibuya crossing



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We anticipate:

- When we cross a street - subconsciously making multiple calculations on moving things (including our body) and assessing what other people, vehicles and systems may or may not do.
- When we choose a new phone - foreseeing its uses, evaluating whether this model will remain relevant long enough, imagining how our friends will react to it...
- When we take on this or that direction for our studies - making assumptions on the job situation of the related professions...
- When we choose a place to live - perhaps, today, incorporating into our thinking the effects of climate change on how life will be in a few decades...
- When we discuss politics and policy issues - most political decisions are made in the name of a better future (which also shows that we can have differing views on, either, what the future holds, or what 'better' should mean)...
- When we are looking forward to a music show - thinking about what we will wear, what the crowd is going to be like and overall imagining ourselves in it before it actually takes place...

PAST KNOWLEDGE, PRESENT EXPERIENCE AND... ANTICIPATION

The way we make some of our decisions is based on knowledge drawn from the past and from what we experience in the present, which provides us with evidence and problems to solve. This is where anticipation comes in: Together with the combination of past knowledge and present experience, anticipation allows us to make short scenarios and to look forward to the event in question.

For example, when we wait for cars to be off the road before crossing the street or, when we change from our scuba-diving wet-suit before attending a rap concert. The experiences we have lived in the past and in the present justify our decisions to act a certain way in the future.

On the other hand, many decisions cannot be taken or explained (including to ourselves) without the influence of conscious or unconscious anticipation. For bigger life decisions, for example when we choose to major in Arts rather than Engineering, together with our past knowledge and present experience, what are our expectations on what the future will be like when we graduate?

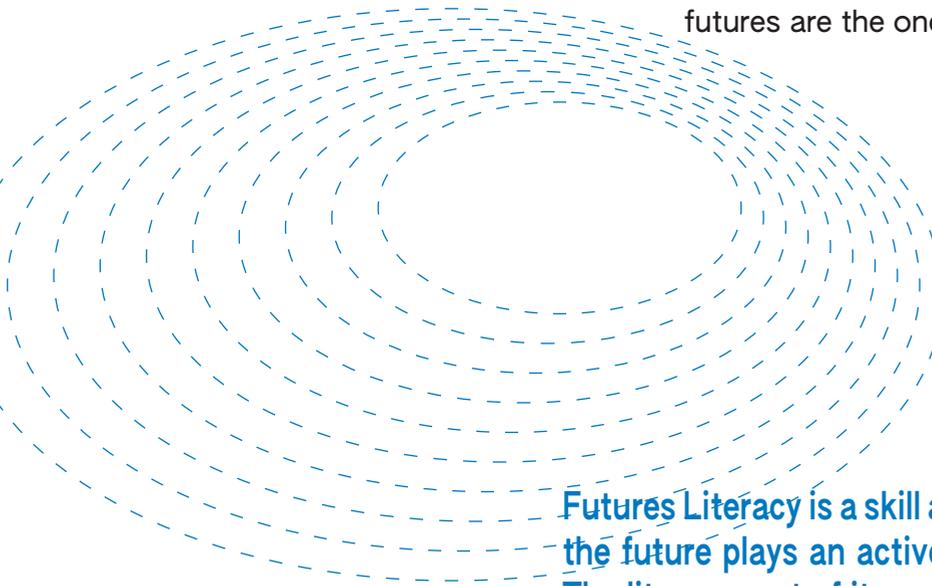
- Will it be completely different or similar from today's present?
- Is it easy for us to foresee or is it fundamentally uncertain ?



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Anticipation is also about agency, it is about acknowledging that our actions will result in shaping certain directions for ourselves as well as for our environment. In other words, when we take a decision, what assumptions are made about our (individual or collective) ability to change the course of the world?

- Are we adapting ourselves to a future we believe is unchangeable? Or, are we shaping the future we want to see? This can relate both to our individual choices (“can I become who I’d like to be?”), and to our environment, our community, our organisation, etc.
- In the idea of shaping the future in a collective manner, how do we define and discuss which futures are the ones we find desirable?



Futures Literacy is a skill allowing us to be aware of how the future plays an active role in what we see and do. The literacy part of it works by moving our anticipation from our subconscious to our conscious mind, and by demonstrating that we also have some agency in what will happen in the future.

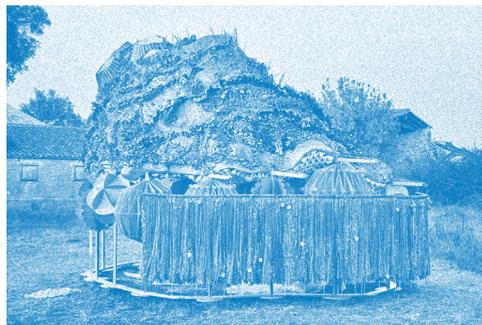
3. EFFECTS OF ANTICIPATION ON THE PRESENT

In Futures Literacy, the future does not “exist”. There is not one future ahead of us just waiting to be discovered. Too many factors interact; too many things depend on what we will do or not do. Just thinking about the future is likely to change it. This is the whole point: we think about the future in order to inform our actions in the present, whilst influencing it at the same time.

Since the future does not exist, thinking about the future - anticipating, as we have seen previously - is primarily an act of imagination: to produce images of possible, plausible and/or desirable directions in our (individual or collective) minds.



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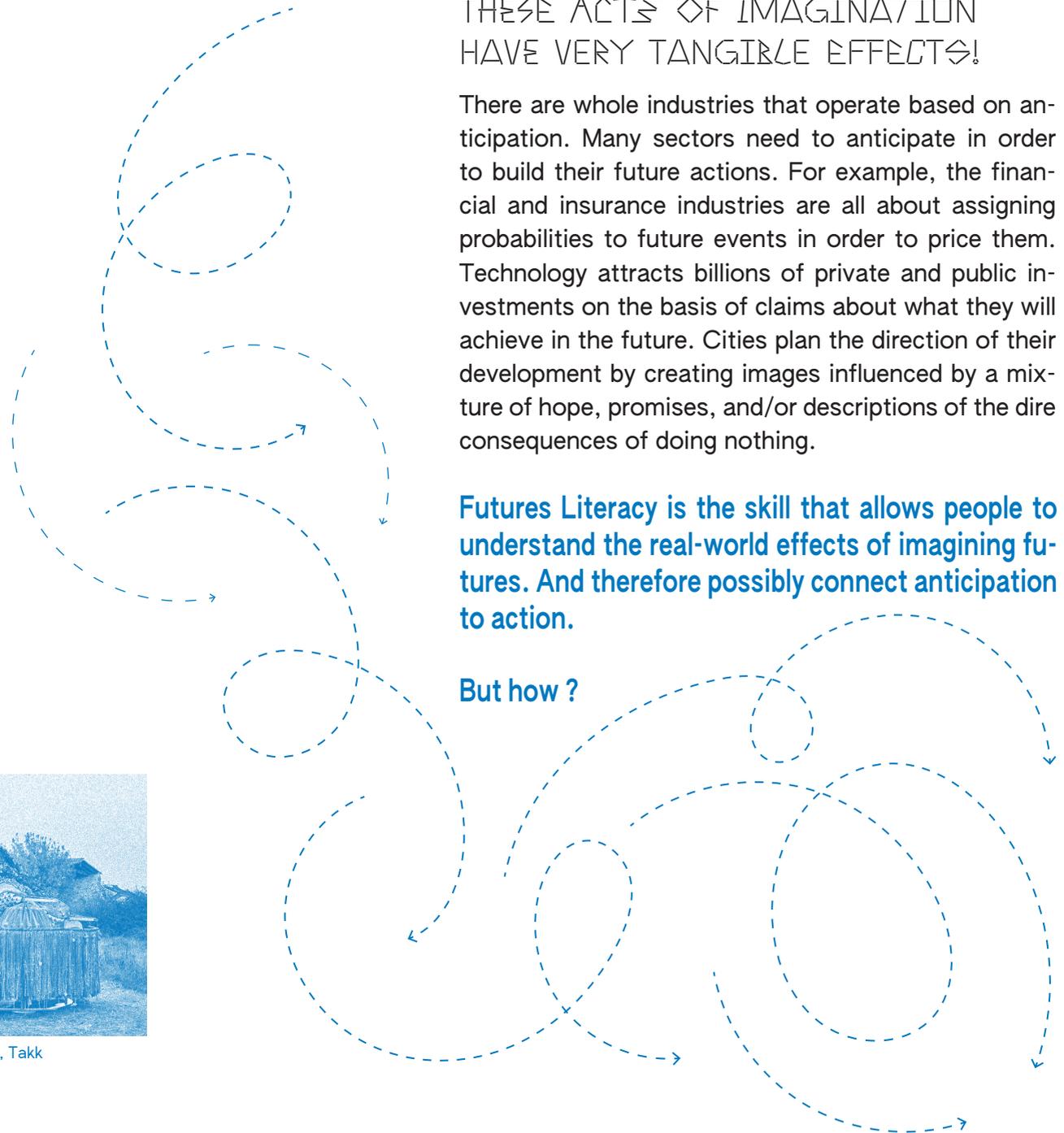
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THESE ACTS OF IMAGINATION HAVE VERY TANGIBLE EFFECTS!

There are whole industries that operate based on anticipation. Many sectors need to anticipate in order to build their future actions. For example, the financial and insurance industries are all about assigning probabilities to future events in order to price them. Technology attracts billions of private and public investments on the basis of claims about what they will achieve in the future. Cities plan the direction of their development by creating images influenced by a mixture of hope, promises, and/or descriptions of the dire consequences of doing nothing.

Futures Literacy is the skill that allows people to understand the real-world effects of imagining futures. And therefore possibly connect anticipation to action.

But how ?



4. DIFFERENT GOALS, DIFFERENT WAYS OF ANTICIPATING

How we make decisions, as individuals or collectives, steers the direction we take as a society...For example, during the XIXth and XXth centuries, and for many collective reasons of past experiences, present knowledge about the world and anticipations, the narrative of progress and growth directed the collective decision making. It overcame most of the other possible visions for the future present at that time and resulted in a global-world approach to development (economy, cities, transport), cementing certain dominant relations towards nature and non-western countries.

Today, when we choose a certain direction for our studies, we are anticipating certain things about the world we wish for and projecting ourselves in it. When we become involved in eco-social causes with others, we are collectively deciding and sharing the images of the world we want to see and learning which actions to take in order to materialize those images.

Are we looking to seize current trends in order to create next year's fashion items? To reach specific goals a few years down the road? To evaluate the best directions in which to invest financially? To make ourselves or our community resilient in the face of likely, but unknown, future catastrophies?

To pave the way for disruptions, or for radical political and social transformations? All these questions somehow require imagining futures (or "using the future" in the language of Futures Literacy) - but



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Depending on what we hope to achieve, on how far ahead we want to look, and whose future we're working on (our own, or that of a country), there are three main ways to “use the future”:

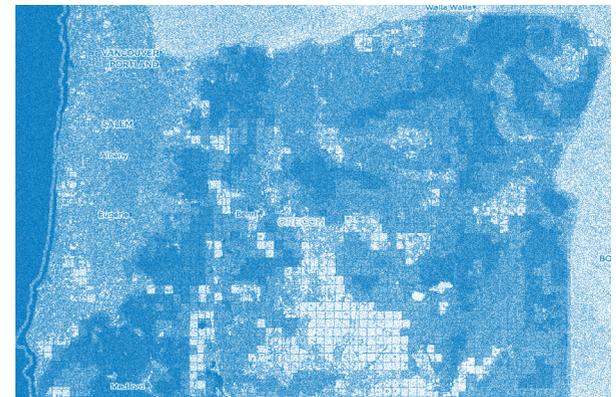
- “Predictive” futures try to reduce uncertainty and gain as much insight on what the future might realistically look like. This approach is adapted to short-term forecasting, strategic planning or risk mitigation and insurance.
- “Plausible” futures see the future as fundamentally uncertain, and those who explore will tend to explore multiple scenarios either to choose one and organize action in order to make it more likely to happen, or to make themselves as ready as possible for all eventualities.
- “Experimental” futures generate images of alternative futures, usually in a collective setting, in order to bring about change. This approach aims to open up new possibilities, to bring people together around new perspectives, and to challenge dominant narratives about the future. It is less about possibility, or even plausibility, than about transformation.

Futures Literacy is the skill that allows people to articulate the differences between various uses of the future, in relation to context (why, where, with whom are we using the future?) and purpose (what do we hope to achieve?).



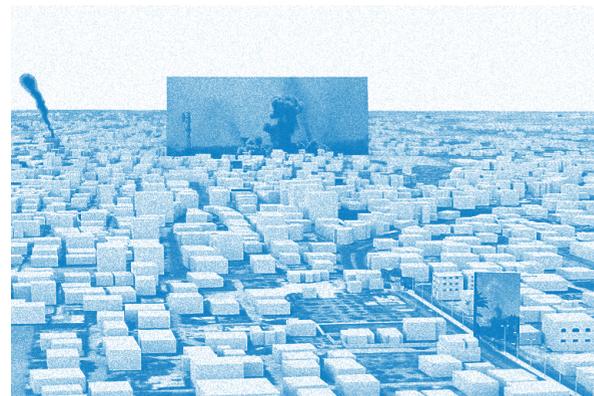
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PLAUSIBLE



© Oregon Department Of Forestry

PREDICTIVE



© Courtesy of Forensic Architecture

EXPERIMENTAL

FUTURES LITERACY IS IMPORTANT TO SOCIETY AS A WHOLE

It is important to mention that the benefits of Futures Literacy extend beyond the individual. You become futures literate through collective intelligence processes in which participants learn together, come to understand their respective points of views, reconnect with the deep sources in their history, culture and life that shape their hopes and fears...

“When people are capable of deciding why and how to use the future, they become better able to detect and create the otherwise invisible - innovation and transformation. They are more at ease with novelty and experimentation. Less anxious about uncertainty. Humbler about controlling the future. More confident about being able to comprehend and appreciate the potential opened up by change.”
- UNESCO, Futures Literacy



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A futures literate society is both more innovative and more cohesive, because it is better able to find common ground in action towards desirable futures.

To create an ecologically and socially sustainable world, we will need to be able to both adapt to change, and create radical change. This can only succeed as shared endeavors. Such endeavors can only be born out of collective processes where alternative futures are imagined, envisioned, discussed, amended, before resulting in actions. In turn, these actions will open new possibilities and generate new uncertainties, requiring the process of “futuring” and acting to work as a kind of continuous loop.

We humans always anticipate. The generations to come will need, more than ever, to better understand their anticipation processes and learn to use the future to navigate their world.

These are the reasons why Unesco has declared Futures Literacy an “essential competency for the 21st century” which can, and should, be made accessible to all.

FUTURE IS NOW PROJECT. WHY WE USED FUTURES LITERACY WITH YOUTH:

In an ever-more complex world, where it is difficult to make sense of what happens, Futures Literacy provides a way to navigate uncertainty, to make sense of emerging phenomena, and to perceive oneself as capable of effecting change - in one's own life, and in one's community. Once again, Futures Literacy can be used for different purposes and different publics. We used Futures Literacy for youth and here are the benefits:

INNOVATION	FL MAKES IT EASIER TO INNOVATE AND TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF INNOVATIONS	FL ENHANCES THE SPEED WITH WHICH CHANGES ARE PERCEIVED AND CHOICES ARE MADE	AGILITY
DISCOVERY	FL MAKES IT EASIER TO DETECT AND MAKE SENSE OF NOVELTY, SHOCKS AND SURPRISES	FL MAKES CHANGE EASIER BECAUSE IT MAKES CHANGE MORE COMPREHENSIBLE	CONFIDENCE
CHOICE	FL MAKES IT EASIER TO BUILD CHOICE MENUS THAT ARE MORE DIVERSE	FL EMPOWERS EXPLORATION AND INVENTION THAT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF UNCERTAINTY AND COMPLEXITY	CAPABILITY
LEADERSHIP	FL DIFFUSES INITIATIVE AND EXPERIMENTATION THROUGHOUT THE COMMUNITY	FL EMBRACES MULTIPLE WAYS OF KNOWING THE WORLD AROUND US, INCLUDING EMOTIONS AND CONTEXTUAL SPECIFICS	KNOWING
STRATEGY	FL MAKES IT EASER TO SEE GENUINELY DISTINCT STRATEGIC ALTERNATIVES	FL MAKES IT EASIER TO TAKE DIVERSIFICATION APPROACHES TO BOTH RISK AND UNCERTAINTY	RESILIENCE

FUTURES LITERATE YOUNGSTERS ARE LIKELY TO:

- Make up their own mind the next time someone in a position of influence or authority tells them that “the future is this or that”;
- Liberate and trust their imagination to imagine alternative futures, share them with others, and act towards them;
- Detect and/or create emerging trends and possibilities, be at ease with novelty and experimentation, and become less anxious about uncertainty;
- Make life choices based on a sense of agency, possibility and trust in their own capacities (including their capacity to adapt and learn);



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- Consider climate change and other ecological crises, not as an absence of future, but as a context within which they are able to act and build futures;
- Develop empathy towards different publics after hearing/reflecting on their ideas about their future(s);
- View the world in a broader perspective and create connections between different subjects and objects;
- Build critical thinking and reflexivity when learning about new topics;
- Become more collaborative in their work and learn to work in diverse teams;
- Adapt to long-term thinking and care for future generations.

ABOUT THE PARTNERS

BRUSSELAVENIR

BrusselAVenir is a socio-artistic citizen lab that creates futures stories with and for Brusselèirs. Through a playful participatory process of futures thinking, collective imagining and storytelling they connect people, organisations and sectors around specific themes. Aim is to trigger imagination and conversation, to raise the desire for more just and sustainable futures for Brussels, and to activate citizens to take up a role in the transition.

PLURALITY UNIVERSITY

The Plurality University (U+) is a non-profit based in France with members from around the world. Its mission is to explore and open possibilities for the emergence of alternative futures, by mobilising resources of the imagination (art, fiction, speculation..). It implements and welcomes projects that : develop the capacities of individuals and organisations to project themselves and imagine alternatives; make visible discussions around transformation and future imaginaries; draw from artistic and alternative forms the transformations needed for our world.

YOUTHWATCH

YouthWatch is the Slovak association of independent experts on youth work and youth policy. Our aim is to contribute to the quality of youth work (non-formal education in youth work), support of young people (especially their sense of initiative), identifying trends and needs of young people, promotion of new approaches and innovation in the youth work and assistance for modern youth policy implementation.



 BrusselAVenir



youth
watch

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