

“Futures literacy
is a competence,
a capacity”

To think about the future in a changing world

Riel Miller on Futures literacy

UNESCO's Riel Miller argues that in times like these it makes sense to take a step back and let new ideas about why and how to imagine the future help us make new and better choices today. We need a new skill set for a different context.

PER KOCH,
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These are times of transformation and upheaval. Many find it hard to meet these changes in any meaningful manner, as existing tools and concepts were built for another time. We still have not grasped what the new one needs. Riel Miller, who now leads UNESCO's Futures literacy activities, has been looking at different ways of thinking about the future for his entire career, with the Ontario Government, at the OECD and as a private consultant. He has worked with The Research Council of Norway, Innovation Norway and the Technology Council of Norway. His doctorate is in economics, but his practice has mostly been focused on designing processes in which people think about the future. Gradually this led him to pioneer what he calls Futures literacy.

Forskningpolitikk met Riel at a café in Paris in December last year.

Here is an extract of that conversation. The full interview is available online at fpol.no/riel-miller

Could you say a few words about Futures literacy and the discipline of anticipation? What is the point of all this?

I want to be quite clear on this point because I think it is not always easy to keep in mind: Futures literacy is a competence, a capacity. Like many competencies it is a multifaceted thing. It includes technical skills, processing skills, social skills, outcomes, awareness. The starting point is that the future does not actually exist. You have no choice but to use anticipatory systems and processes, to imagine a future. This is the case of conscious human anticipation. So we use our anticipatory systems and processes to create, fabricate, different imaginary futures.

Futures literacy is the skill that enables us to diversify the reasons and methods we deploy when 'using-the-future' beyond forecasting, beyond prediction. This does not mean that prediction and forecasting are unessential. Of course, we still want to use prediction when deciding to go meet someone, like you and I today deciding we would meet at this café. We still want to be able to use what happened in the past to think about what may happen in the future. Efforts to mitigate carbon emissions in order to address climate change is a powerful example of using predicted futures based on extrapolation to make decisions. In this case we have evidence from the past, we have evidence in current indi- →



Foto: joni-gall



Riel Miller often uses the image of bird murmuration to illustrate the need for agility and resilience or, as he puts it, «setting the conditions for changes in the conditions of change».

UNESCO has been part of foresight-exercises, or Futures Literacy Laboratories, all over the world, from Tanzania to Norway.



Foto: saturna86

“Today we need to be able to produce strategic distance”

cators, and we think that this means that the climate will change. But accepting this kind of predictive assumption does not mean that we know what will happen, just that we are willing – for a variety of reasons to make certain assumptions.

We can ‘use-the-future’ to do more than predict or search for assumptions that give us the illusion of certainty. Indeed, we can use it in a way that is counter-intuitive, at odds with today’s common-sense. This is one of the most difficult aspects of Futures literacy: It is possible to

‘use-the-future’ not for the future.

To put it in other terms, we can change why and how we imagine the future by moving away from the dominant approach of likely/unlikely and desirable/undesirable futures. Instead we can ‘use-the-future’ to expand our perception of the present by liberating our imaginations from the constraints of likely or desired futures.

We can open ourselves up to imagining futures that are wild, strange, odd, confused and nevertheless reveal aspects of the present, that would not be noticeable or

meaningful if we simply restrained our thinking. I can give you an example: If my main concern about the future is that people should have jobs, and I believe education is the way to make sure people will get jobs in the future; then the futures my imagination invents are going to be about education and jobs.

In other words, I will have projected the organizational forms that dominated the past into the future. As a result, my preoccupations in the present, what I perceive and what gets privileged by my paying attention to it, are the familiar ways of doing things. Education reform to meet the needs of predicted future jobs will be my main interest, even though efforts at this kind of supply-demand forecasting and planning have repeatedly failed in the past and all around the world. Because, as it turns out, one of the fundamental characteristics of ‘market economies’ is the complex emergence through cycles of birth and death of companies, sectors, jobs, etc. It is not predictable.

This means that Futures literacy could also be part of what this magazine is all about, research and innovation policy, learning policy, education policy. In this context there are certain trends, drivers, possibilities. What are the ones policy makers should take into consideration right now?

I have spent all of my professional life as an advisor to decision-makers, particularly in government. And I have always asked myself, am I trying to improve existing institutions, current ways of expressing and organizing our collective life? Or is there another way of looking at society? Our collectivity that gives status to the policy of everyday actions, by people who are never monads but always relationally expressive and performative. Right now, I am convinced it is both.

You and I both understand the importance of research meant to support policy makers exercising power within the existing institutions and systems for organizing power. We both worked with the OECD, it is an institution that is dedicated to figuring out how the people working in one particular part of our collective existence can do a better job. This is a very valuable thing to think about, but if you can’t get outside the boundaries of improving existing systems, you can’t really pose strategic choices – you can only consider tactical options within one strategic framework. For many reasons this preservationist or backward-looking point-of-view no longer seems tenable. Today we need to be

able to produce strategic distance. We need to be able to step back from what we are doing. We need to be able to ask new questions, not just solve familiar problems. From a research and policy perspective, enhancing our capacity to be open to strategic difference is important, because I think it has very tangible implications for policies meant to nurture innovation. We can get better at allowing emergence, putting confidence in spontaneity and improvisation. Let go of the stress and obsessive efforts related to patching up old and dying systems. Perhaps being more Futures literate would enhance both our appreciation and our ability to generate the diversity that is simultaneously an expression and result of innovation. Getting better at seeing our boxes and continuously stepping inside and outside the every moving boxes, could assist those who try to set policy for the existing power structures to find entirely new ways of playing a role.

What if policy makers were to say: «One of the big challenges for me as a provider of public goods, is to spend time thinking about things that I have not made, things that nobody can see, because the way we currently look at the world, obscures and hides so many things. Let us find ways to stand back, to search and invent, using some new tools that help us to sense and make-sense of emergent, unnamed, novelty.»

You are using this methodology right now, within UNESCO and with members of UNESCO. Can you give a few examples of how this is done?

The day before yesterday I was in Tunisia, and we ran a Futures Literacy Laboratory on the future of women entrepreneurs in Tunisia. We conducted the workshop with 40 Tunisian policy makers, women entrepreneurs, men entrepreneurs, and we discussed the future of women's entrepreneurship. How did we do it? We did it precisely through learning by doing. In a Futures Literacy Lab people are invited to make tacit knowledge explicit through conversations that create shared understanding. These processes harness the collective intelligence of a group by taking them through a universal and very conventional learning process.

In phase one participants talk about what they predict the future will be like. This is the probable future just about everyone bet they are willing to make. In Tunisia they said: «Well, I think in Tunisia women entrepreneurs are going to be facing some problems in 2038 (which was the year in

the future that we chose), around the regulatory system, the laws.» That was a prediction. Then we discussed what they hoped would happen. They hoped that women entrepreneurs would have no obstacles in the system around them – the banks, but also, for instance, the partners. As quite a few of the women entrepreneurs explained initially many of the men were sceptical about a woman being an entrepreneur, and they hoped that in 2038 those obstacles would be overcome. After the group discussed their hopes and expectations, they realize that they haven't been thinking very much about the future, and that they can think about the future in more detailed and creative ways. Here they are still in a fairly conventional approach. They think of the future as a place they want to go to. But how do we think about it in a more open way? And this is where we go to phase two of the learning curve, which is a little bit more difficult. It is not tacit to explicit. It is a reframing. In Tunisia we got the participants to reframe women's entrepreneurship in Tunisia by thinking about a world in which they were able to do what they wanted. How did that work? How did they communicate and connect? We used a visual metaphor, one that I have used before. It's what in English we call a «murmuration». A murmuration is a flock of birds, generally starlings, that fly together in swirling patterns that defy rigid patterns of centre-periphery or up-down or solid blocks versus fragments. To reframe, the participants need to let go of existing and familiar patterns by starting to play, imagine how things happen in daily life in a strange world, with new organizational forms, habits, relationships. This is the steep part of the learning curve, the participants work in small groups for an hour and a half, imagining what life is like for women entrepreneurs in this diversified, transparent, low cost, high confidence, and highly fluid world. Then the break out groups report back to plenary to share their descriptions of the murmuration society – or as I often call it – the learning intensive society.

Once we've collected their attempts to describe this disruptive, odd situation, the «lab» moves to the third phase in which the groups contrast the reframed futures of phase two with the likely and desirable futures of phase one. They begin to see how their initial anticipatory assumptions framed their imaginations and how they can play with the assumptions to push their imaginations in new, unexpected directions. Finally, this creates the conditions,



Riel Miller at Le Fumoir ved Louvre, Paris.

including the willingness to be creative and change assumptions, needed to ask new questions. In the case of Tunisian women entrepreneurs there were new questions about the role of peer to peer payment systems and verification over the internet. They started to question the role and nature of current institutions and habits. They saw today's possibilities in new ways and could begin imagining how current systems for establishing trust and meaningful communications might be hiding other options or obstructing certain changes. In the end they said: «We have some new things we can think about that we weren't thinking about before. We are starting to see how we can 'use-the-future' to see things differently in the present.» Over the last five years UNESCO has run more than 36 such Futures Literacy Labs, on a vast range of subjects, with a broad range of different kinds of participants, spanning every continent.

For more about UNESCO's Futures Literacy Work see: fpol.no/riel-miller

Follow Riel Miller over at twitter: @RielM

Riel Miller: *Transforming the Future* (Open Access); *Anticipation in the 21st Century* (Hardback) - Routledge.