

EDUCATING FOR A LIVABLE TOMORROW: THE ROLE OF FUTURISTS IN SHAPING LEARNING



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Introduction: Awakening Futures

Imagine students who don't just recite history - but challenge it. Learners who don't only absorb facts - but anticipate what comes next. As the world hurtles into unpredictable complexity, futurists are stepping into classrooms as guides, helping learners develop foresight, resilience, and ethical imagination.

The future isn't something we wait for - it's what we create, moment by moment. This sentence reflects a seismic shift: from passive education to future-facing learning.

1. Why education needs a futurist

We are living in a time often described as VUCA - volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. This is not just a catchy acronym; it is a lived reality for individuals, institutions, and entire societies. The traditional models of education - linear, siloed, and backward-facing - are increasingly unfit for purpose in a world where change is the only constant. If students are to thrive rather than merely survive, they must be equipped not only with

knowledge of the past but with tools to imagine, anticipate, and shape the future. This is where the role of futurists in education becomes not just valuable, but vital.

In 2021, UNESCO's landmark Futures of Education report made a bold and urgent call to action: education must foster collective intelligence and forge a "new social contract." This means reimagining learning not just as the transmission of information but as a collaborative, future-oriented process that empowers individuals to navigate complexity, act ethically, and participate meaningfully in societal transformation. The report emphasizes that without systemic change in how and what we teach, we risk perpetuating outdated paradigms that are incapable of addressing the ecological, technological, and social challenges we face.

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This call is echoed by the Association of Professional Futurists (APF), a global network of over 500 foresight professionals working across 40 countries. The APF has consistently highlighted the growing demand for what it terms "futures competencies" - skills such as systems thinking, long-term visioning, scenario planning, and ethical decision-making. These are not abstract or philosophical luxuries; they are pragmatic capabilities needed to steer through the unpredictable terrain of the 21st century. The APF's work suggests that just as numeracy and literacy were foundational to industrial-era education, futures literacy must now become a cornerstone of learning in the age of AI, climate change, and global interconnectedness.

In 2022, the urgency of these insights was brought vividly to life at the Dubai Future Forum - the world's largest gathering of futurists to date. There, over 400 futurists representing more than 45 leading organizations convened to explore how future-ready strategies could reshape education, governance, health, and technology. The forum didn't just share ideas; it showcased scalable models, real

world innovations, and policy frameworks already being implemented from Finland to the UAE. One key theme emerged again and again: we must move from reactive adaptation to proactive transformation. In other words, we need to stop preparing students for a world that no longer exists - and start preparing them to lead in the world that is rapidly emerging.

Futures literacy is more than a skill set; it is a mindset - one that empowers learners not simply to react to the future but to participate in shaping it. In an age marked by climate change, rapid technological acceleration, demographic shifts, and global uncertainty, traditional education often struggles to keep up.

These three movements - UNESCO's visionary blueprint, the APF's global expertise, and the Dubai Future Forum's real-world momentum - together confirm an undeniable truth: integrating futures thinking into education is not a luxury, it is essential. The future is not some distant horizon - it is already arriving in waves, and our young people are standing in the surf. To leave them without the skills to read the tides, map the coastline, and build resilient boats would not only be a disservice - it would be an abdication of our generational responsibility.

A futurist in education is not someone who claims to predict what's next. Rather, it is someone who teaches students to ask better questions, explore multiple scenarios, and develop the courage to imagine alternatives. It is someone who believes that while the future cannot be controlled, it can be shaped - wisely, ethically, and creatively. And in a world where headlines swing between crisis and opportunity, perhaps the greatest lesson we can teach is that the future is not something we await; it is something we co-create, together.

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2. What futures literacy looks like

Futures literacy is more than a skill set; it is a mindset - one that empowers learners not simply to react to the future but to participate in shaping it. In an age marked by climate change, rapid technological acceleration, demographic shifts, and global uncertainty, traditional education often struggles to keep up. It tends to focus on memorizing established knowledge, preparing students for careers that may no longer exist, or reinforcing rigid disciplines that don't reflect how the world actually operates. Futures literacy, by contrast, cultivates adaptive intelligence: the ability to think systemically, anticipate change, and design resilient, ethical responses to emerging challenges.

Futurists play a key role in embedding this mindset into educational systems. They bring with them tools and frameworks that encourage anticipatory learning - learning that's not just about solving yesterday's problems but about exploring what might be next. One core principle is systems thinking: helping students understand the interconnectedness of global phenomena, from food security to digital ethics. In the futures-literate classroom, learners don't just study isolated facts; they analyze patterns, map consequences, and ask, "What happens if...?" This fosters not just intellectual engagement but emotional resilience - critical in a world where uncertainty is the norm.

Research from Tamkang University in Taiwan, a pioneer in futures studies education, shows that students trained in foresight demonstrate increased self-efficacy, long-term thinking, and strategic imagination. These students report feeling more confident in navigating life's complexities because they are equipped with frameworks to understand change and tools to engage with ambiguity. Instead of fearing the future, they see it as a landscape of possibility.

This paradigm shift is closely linked with the integration of STEM disciplines and inquiry-based learning approaches. STEM - science, technology, engineering, and mathematics - offers powerful methods for understanding and shaping the material world. But when combined with futures literacy, it becomes more than technical skill; it becomes a gateway to solving the "wicked problems" that define our era, such as climate resilience, global health, and digital democracy. Inquiry-based learning invites students to become researchers of their own futures, turning classrooms into living laboratories of curiosity, experimentation, and co-creation.

This is where the magic of futures education truly comes alive. When guided by futurists, classrooms are no longer static containers for curriculum delivery. They transform into dynamic innovation hubs. Students may find

themselves blending artificial intelligence with sociology, urban planning with ecology, or storytelling with blockchain technology. These transdisciplinary explorations reflect the real-world intersections that define modern life. They prepare learners not only to navigate complexity but to thrive in it - to become what sociologist Ziauddin Sardar calls “active agents of futures,” not passive recipients of someone else’s vision.

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A futures-literate education does not offer one “correct” vision of tomorrow. Instead, it trains students to imagine multiple futures, weigh their implications, and develop the skills to bring desirable futures into being. This imaginative practice - sometimes through speculative design, world-building, or scenario modeling - engages the whole person: cognitively, emotionally, and socially. It invites learners to sculpt their future, rather than merely consume it.

This is especially critical as we face an accelerating convergence of existential challenges and transformative opportunities. Whether dealing with the ethics of AI, the realities of planetary boundaries, or the redesign of social systems, the ability to engage with the future as a creative, navigable space is no longer optional - it’s foundational. Futures literacy helps cultivate what philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls “narrative imagination”: the ability to step into the shoes of others, to understand alternative realities, and to act with empathy and foresight.

In this context, the role of the futurist is both practical and poetic. They bring methodologies like the Delphi technique, horizon scanning, or futures wheels - but they also spark the imagination, ignite purpose, and cultivate the courage to reimagine everything from cities to careers. They show learners that complexity isn’t chaos - it’s a canvas. And that the future is not just something that happens - it’s something we can learn to read, shape, and ultimately, inhabit with intention.

Futures literacy, then, is not about certainty. It’s about capacity - the capacity to stay curious, to stay awake, and to move forward with both humility and hope. In cultivating these capacities, we are not only educating smarter individuals; we are building wiser societies. And perhaps most importantly, we are reminding ourselves that education, at its heart, is not about preparing for the known. It is about preparing for the yet-to-be - together.

Futures education invites learners to sculpt - not just consume - their tomorrow.

3. Why this matters now

The World Economic Forum anticipates that by 2027, **35-65% of tasks may be automated**, but **50% of workers now lack adequate training**. Meanwhile, generations like Alpha expect **lifelong, digital-first, personalized learning**.

We cannot prepare students for futures that don’t exist with the tools of the past.

4. The Futurist’s Toolbox - Extended Narrative

To equip learners for the unknown, futurists rely on a robust set of methodologies that form the foundation of futures literacy. One of the most fundamental tools is scenario planning - the practice of envisioning multiple, plausible future worlds. Rather than predicting a single outcome, this method helps learners explore diverse trajectories and prepare for a range of possibilities. It encourages flexibility and creative problem-solving, fostering the ability to pivot in response to change.

Complementing this is **systems mapping**, which allows students to see beyond linear cause and effect, identifying the complex web of interconnections that define today’s challenges. By visualizing how economic, environmental, social, and technological factors influence one another, students gain a deeper understanding of leverage points - where small interventions can lead to systemic change.

Ethical foresight is another crucial pillar. As emerging technologies redefine the boundaries of science, privacy, and identity, learners must be equipped to anticipate moral dilemmas and evaluate the long-term social and ethical consequences of their actions. This practice cultivates a sense of responsibility that is both future-facing and grounded in shared human values.

Finally, **iterative prototyping** brings theory into practice. Students are encouraged to design, test, and refine their ideas in real-world or simulated contexts. This not only strengthens creativity and resilience but also embeds the principle of continuous learning - a cornerstone of Education 5.0, the emerging paradigm of learner-centric education.

Education 5.0 integrates cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and extended reality (AR/VR), but it does so in service of human development, not in replacement of it. In this context, the futurist's toolbox becomes a catalyst for experiential, adaptive, and ethical education - one that aligns digital innovation with emotional and social intelligence.

5. Bringing It to Life - Extended Narrative

Bridging the gap between theory and implementation begins with collaboration. Educators and institutions can bring futures literacy to life by **partnering with professional futurists** or engaging experts from organizations such as the Association of Professional Futurists (APF). These partnerships offer fresh insights, methodological rigor, and real-world application.

To embed futures thinking into educational systems meaningfully, schools and universities should **integrate futures literacy into curricula**, using tools that develop not just cognitive skills but also emotional intelligence and adaptive agility. This involves rethinking pedagogies to include foresight exercises, interdisciplinary projects, and opportunities for students to engage with real-world challenges.

Measuring the effectiveness of these initiatives is equally essential. Institutions can **evaluate the impact of futures education through futures-oriented metrics**, such as Tamkang University's four-level model of assessment. This model measures student development across four dimensions: reaction (how students feel about the learning experience), learning (what they have absorbed), behavior (how they apply knowledge), and results (the real-world impact of that application).

By weaving these approaches into educational design, futures literacy becomes not just an enrichment activity but a structural transformation. It positions learners to navigate uncertainty with insight, shape ethical innovations, and build futures that are not only possible - but profoundly desirable.

6. A call to action

Education isn't a preparation for life - it is life shaping itself forward. Our children aren't waiting for a future - they are living it now. And to navigate its turbulence, they need more than facts - they need **foresight**.

Futurists in education don't predict tomorrow - they light the path toward it. They teach us to ask: What if? What else? What's next?

Let's equip every learner with the tools to navigate uncertainty, shape opportunity, and build a **livable tomorrow**. Because when futures literacy becomes the education standard, **we don't just survive change - we shape it**.

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