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Facing Futures Literacy

I. Introduction

Debates on media literacy and various literacies as well as corresponding literacy practices have been playing a significant role in many countries for decades. But only recently, the discourse about futures literacy and related practices have entered the scene. The focus is on a United Nations initiative and related discourse contexts, laboratories and practices.¹ This initiative is not concerned with highly speculative futures contracts traded on stock exchanges but with nothing less than claims of general education and the emergence of globally relevant capacities, “in a way that may be compared to the push and pull of the emergence of the universal capability to read and write during the industrial revolution”.² In so doing, futures literacy is about broadening the scope for thinking and acting, promoting transformational potentials, and improving the possibilities for variably dealing with uncertainty in general and with unexpected developments and events in particular. The main focus is on “preparation that enhances our capacity to make sense of the un-

¹ Cf. <https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy>.

² Riel Miller, Roberto Poli and Pierre Rossel, “The Discipline of Anticipation: Foundations for Futures Literacy”, in Riel Miller (ed.), *Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century*, Paris–Oxford: UNESCO–Routledge, 2018, p. 58.

knowable when it happens”³ rather than on trend assumptions, risk calculations, and calculated probabilities.

On the one hand, pedagogical relevance formulas have always included a future-oriented component. In this sense, there is a long history of futures of education including implicit or explicit contracts of generations, emancipatory future workshops, and all sorts of futuristic ed-tech promises. On the other hand, recent concepts and practices of futures literacy are often dealing with global challenges such as educational (in)justice, education for sustainable development or educational accountability. However, there are ambivalences and paradoxes to be questioned. In what sense is futures literacy a forward-looking concept or rather an example of educational politics of unsustainability? How can it contribute to profound educational innovation in cultures of digitality rather than proving to be another example of the literacification of everything?

II. Facing Futures Literacy – Challenges and Questions

The title of this contribution – *Facing Futures Literacy* – builds on the semantic fields of tension that are situated at the crossroads of various meanings of “facing”, such as “fronting”, “looking” or “pointing toward”, “opposing courageously”, “encountering” or “performing a face-to-face relation”, and “future(s)”, such as “things to be”, “events to happen”, “times yet to come”, “horizon of possibilities” or “expectations of development”. Moreover, there is a creative tension between the two basic interpretations “facing *Futures Literacy*”, for instance by pointing toward details of concepts or practices of *Futures Literacy*, and “*Facing Futures* literacy”, for example by dealing with the role that literacy and literacy skills can play in the context of our handling of desired, feared, expected or unanticipated futures.

³ Riel Miller, “Learning, the Future, and Complexity: An Essay on the Emergence of Futures Literacy”, *European Journal of Education*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2015), p. 521. DOI: 10.1111/ejed.12157.

In this short paper, I am going to disentangle and question some aspects of these basic interpretations that are entangled in the conception of futures literacy as related to the United Nations initiative. As with all compound terms, this conception depends on the meaning of the individual terms and the modalities of linking them, as well as the ways in which they are used. To the extent that this paper is about the United Nations initiative and the discourse contexts associated with it, the spectrum of multiple meanings can be narrowed down, although the vagueness of the definition does leave some room for interpretation. On a website of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), futures literacy is defined as an essential competence for the 21st century and as a “universally accessible skill that builds on the innate human capacity to imagine the future”⁴. Futures literacy “offers a clear, field tested solution to poverty-of-the-imagination”⁵. It is further characterized as “capability” and as “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.”⁶

Moreover, the broad concept of futures literacy also aims to promote democratic orientations:

Democratizing the origins of people’s images of the future opens up new horizons in much the same way that establishing universal reading and writing 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.⁷

⁴ UNESCO, *Futures Literacy: An Essential Competency for the 21st Century*, 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy/about>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

In addition, the importance of upgrading humanities subjects education for the future of democracy is emphasized:

Finding new ways to connect and reconnect education to the humanities is also tremendously important for the future of democracy. Philosophy, history, literature, and the arts can connect us with purpose, an appreciation of critical inquiry, empathy, ethics, and imagination. All of these humanist approaches are also vital to strengthening students' "futures literacy" – their ability to understand the role that the future plays in what they see and do.⁸

This underlines the social and political dimension of developing and promoting futures literacy and at the same time distinguishes it from those dispositional rationalist orientations whose primacy lies in the predictability, calculability, and planability of future events and processes. Riel Miller illustrates this in a futures literacy framework as shown in Figure 1. Forms of strategic preparation and planning are here assigned to the mode of anticipation for the future. This includes both short-term relevant everyday performances of preparation, for example, for a shopping trip or a meal, as well as longer-term planning and professional forms of intentional realization of specific futures. From this, drawing on Heidegger's *Being and Time*⁹, he distinguishes anticipation for emergence, which is borne of a concern for existence but is not directed toward a goal by means of preparatory and planning stakes. In this sense, the future of anticipation for emergence is "a disposable construct, a throwaway non-goal that need not be constrained by probability or desirability".¹⁰

⁸ UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, 2021, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707.locale=en>.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962 (first published in 1927).

¹⁰ Riel Miller, "Sensing and Making-Sense of Futures Literacy: Towards a Futures Literacy Framework (FLF)", in Riel Miller (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 20.

Discipline of Anticipation (DoA) (Anticipatory Systems (AS))			Epistemological (Knowledge Creation Processes (KCP))	
System	Purpose	Type	General- Scalable (GS) <small>(statistics, common denominators, universals, repetition)</small>	Specific – Unique (SU) <small>(novelty, ephemerality, spontaneity, improvisation, difference)</small>
O n t o l o g i c a l	Conscious Closed	AS 1 Preparation & AS 2 Planning ↑	AA1	AA2
	Conscious Semi- closed/ open	AS 3 Novelty (Not-doing) ↓	AA3	AA4
		Non-Conscious Anticipation	AA5	AA6
			Anticipatory Assumptions in biology, physics, mathematics, sociology, etc.	

Figure 1: The Futures Literacy Framework.¹¹

The design principles and modalities of organizing the action-based learning processes based on this framework aim to develop skills that enable individuals and groups to better understand the multifaceted role that the future plays in their lives. Like media literacy or information literacy, futures literacy is a very broad concept that opens up a wide range of possible applications. However, the exclusive claim that sometimes resonates in texts on futures literacy¹² seems strange, however, given the long tradition of different varieties of cooperative and co-creative futures thinking that distance themselves from technocratic forms of planning, monitoring, and control. This applies to the much-cited future workshops¹³ as well

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24. See also Riel Miller and Richard Sandford, “Futures Literacy: The Capacity to Diversify Conscious Human Anticipation”, in Roberto Poli (ed.), *Handbook of Anticipation*, Cham: Springer, 2019, pp. 73–91.

¹² See e.g. Riel Miller et al., cf. note 2 above

¹³ Robert Jungk and Norbert R. Müllert, *Zukunftswerkstätten: Mit Phantasie gegen Routine und Resignation*, München: Heyne, 1995 (first published in 1981).

as, for example, to contemporary approaches to organizational learning based on “emergent innovation”¹⁴, which emphasize the collaborative exploration of emerging future potentials and co-creative future design.

While claims of exclusivity of futures literacy could undoubtedly be specified in the course of an analysis of commonalities with and differences to other futures practices and their justification in the context of applied or basic theoretical futures research, there are at least three basic issues that are related to pivotal challenges.

First, paradoxical structures of epistemological and methodological opening and closing remain underexamined in discourses of futures literacy. This can be illustrated by opposing criticisms. According to Jan Erik Karlsen,¹⁵ a more rigorous definition of futures literacy would be needed that enables empirical operationalization and demonstration of causal effects within a logic of functional explanations. Then again, Astrid Mangnus et al.¹⁶ emphasize the importance of epistemological and methodological dimensions of different concepts of futures and futures literacy in terms of the scope for thought and action they open up. Also, Keri Facer and Arathi Skriprakash¹⁷ see a danger of narrowing the concept in the precise codification of futures literacy with regard to a specific form of “rational” use of futures. This would give the concept elitist features, while other forms of shaping futures and dealing with future potential would be stamped with the label of “illiteracy”. In these conflicting discourse contexts, it is on the one hand a matter of conflicting goals between methodological claims of precision and relevance

¹⁴ Markus F. Peschl, “Learning from the Future as a Novel Paradigm for Integrating Organizational Learning And Innovation”, *The Learning Organization*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-01-2021-0018>.

¹⁵ Karlsen, Jan Erik, “Futures Literacy in the Loop”, *European Journal of Futures Research*, vol. 9, no. 17 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40309-021-00187-y>.

¹⁶ Astrid C. Mangnus, Jeroen Oomen, Joost M. Vervoort and Maarten A. Hajer, “Futures Literacy and the Diversity of the Future”, *Futures* 132, pp. 1–9 (2021).

¹⁷ Keri Facer and Arathi Skriprakash, “Provincialising Futures Literacy: A Caution Against Codification”, *Futures* 133 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2021.102807>.

as well as epistemological differences between holistic and particularistic approaches. Furthermore, it is also about contradictions between claims of a future-open development of future competencies on the basis of democratic and global-ethical orientations and the skillful marketing of accompanying measures to calm consciences in post-democratic zones of prosperity in view of the inequality dynamics in digital capitalism.

Second, futures literacy tends to be associated with a forward-looking claim to general education and its global relevance¹⁸ without taking a differentiated look at the future of literacies. This concerns claims of historic relevance, too, especially regarding the development of literacy skills during the First Industrial Revolution¹⁹, as well as problems of educational (in)justice, education for sustainable development, and educational responsibility as they are also discussed in current educational sociological discourses. Given the broad scope of such claims, an argumentative contrast with historical and contemporary analyses and modeling of the future of education and literacy would be expected. After all, in the course of the differentiation of literacy discourses, various accentuations have been made that seek to account for both current and future developments (cf., for example, new literacies, multiliteracies, visual literacy, digital literacy, data literacy). However, a differentiated discussion of future-relevant literacy concepts with a broad scope and of the future of literacies in general seems to be one of the desiderata of discourses on futures literacy so far. This is also surprising insofar as earlier work on the topic of the future of literacy²⁰ provides important points of departure for current discourses and assessments concerning the future of literacies.

¹⁸ See Riel Miller et al., cf. note 2 above, p. 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See Robert Disch, “Beyond Literacy”, in B. N. Schwartz (ed.), *Affirmative Education*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972, pp. 170–180; John E. Readence and Diane M. Barone (eds.), “Envisioning the Future of Literacy”. *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2000).

And third, in the discourses on futures literacy, considerations of the conceptual and application-related limitations come up very short. One searches in vain for considerations beyond literacies and determinations of relationships between, for example, literacy, numeracy, mathemacy, oracy, visuacy, picturacy, and audability²¹. Obviously, futures literacy is not primarily about conceptions and practices of reading and writing or about forms of text-based media use with respect to current and foreseeable forms of typographic multiplicity. Literacy is rather conceived in a metaphorical sense similar to many other “literacies” – ranging from *art literacy* to *biomedica literacy* and *cheating literacy* to *zoological literacy*. Futures literacy would need to be located within the ensemble of different literacies, taking into account the underlying concepts of literacy and their contributions to shaping the future and to a better understanding of the role of the future in thought and action. Moreover, there is a need of reflecting both conceptual limitations as well as limitations of the metaphorical application of literacy concepts. The question, however, is to what extent complementary processes of expanding fields of meaning and ways of using literacy concepts as well as routines of figurative transfer of contexts of meaning are part of a sustainable solution here or part of the problem. The question then takes on even more weight when the application-oriented specifications on the basis of metaphorical concepts are also accompanied by mainstreaming activities and hegemonic claims of particular interests.

III. Towards Reconceptualizations Within and Beyond Literacies

Like education and competencies, literacies rank among the contested terms that mediate between educational research, policy and practice. This is also true for futures literacy, not least in view of the forward-looking general education claim mentioned above. This

²¹ In the sense of *acoustic abilities* and sound-related competencies.

claim is characterized – similar to the claims of education open to the future in the context of predictable competence development – by fundamental paradoxes of opening and closing, freedom and coercion, as well as uniformity and diversity. If futures literacy is to mean more than just another example of the literacification of (almost) everything, then it needs comprehensive examination of conceptual and performative dimensions of its paradoxical structures. As for further conceptual development, clarifications are needed not only as regards the use of concepts such as time or anticipation, and issues of dealing with cultural heritage, complexity, and utopian and dystopian imaginings.²² Clarifications of futures literacy are also needed with respect to following topics:

- (a) Development of explicit notions on commonalities and differences with other approaches to collaborative probing of emerging futures potentials and co-creative futures making.
- (b) Specification of writing and reading competences in the context of the exploration of emerging future potentials without subsuming all future-related activities under literacy. Accordingly, text genres, literacy practices, reading and writing processes as well as literacy development are in the foreground when it comes to the exploration of perspectives for future (digital) citizenship, modes of empowerment of both historic and future-related imagination, options for co-creative future design and chances for enhancement of our abilities to deal with issues of change.
- (c) Analysis of the tension between futures literacy and the future of literacies, also as related to the history of the future of literacies.
- (d) Clarification of futures literacy within an ecology of literacies²³ as regards both concepts of literacy and their ap-

²² Roberto Poli, “The Challenges of Futures Literacy”, *Futures* 132 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2021.102800>.

²³ Theo Hug, “From Literacy to an Ecology of Literacies? Reflections on Some Conceptual Issues”, in Barbara Gross and Ulrike Stadler-Altman (eds), *Beyond erziehungswissenschaftlicher Grenzen: Diskurse zu Entgrenzungen der Disziplin*,

plication.

- (e) Explication of the relative importance of literacy in the ensemble of knowledge forms and practices that correspond to numeracy, mathemacy, oracy, visuacy, picturacy, and audability as well as clarification of the various contributions of these forms and practices to the field of future studies and future-related practices.

Reconceptualizing futures literacy both within and beyond literacies could contribute to a deeper understanding of limitations and freedom of the design of future-related activities. It could help to bring multifaceted innovation paths into view and to enhance scopes for thought and action open to the future in many areas of society and especially in educational contexts. Currently, trend assumptions, risk scoring and calculated probabilities seem to be very popular wherever there is talk of digitalization and digital transformation. A broader understanding of future-related competencies could help ensure that neither a focus on digital skilling and surveillance in education nor ongoing trends of literacification are promising candidates in view of multiple global crises. Its rather knowledge diversity and thoughtful integration of various knowledge forms and related practices that enable profound educational innovation in cultures of digitality and successful dealing with manifold challenges when facing futures.