

IMAGINING THE FUTURE OF THE TRANSITION FROM “YOUTH” TO “ADULT”

A FUTURES LITERACY UNESCO KNOWLEDGE LAB (FL UKNOWLAB)

Room XV - UNESCO Annex - Bonvin Building - 1 Rue Miollis, 75015, Paris

PARIS, 13 -14, JANUARY 2014

The Topic

Humans change with age. We are born with a specific set of dependencies and relatively limited capabilities when compared with later dexterity and cognitive attributes. As we get older we acquire a range of capacities that can enable differing types and degrees of independence and inter-dependence, responsibility and freedom. Each person lives these changes in their own way, but when groups of people are examined with the goal of discerning common patterns it is usually easy to describe a set of life stages that most people experience. One way of characterizing the shared temporal stages is physiological, other ways describe psychological, relational or performative



aspects of what happens to people over the life cycle. The aim in this workshop is to explore the attributes of one specific phase, the period when a human undergoes a set of physiological and social changes that can be called the transition from “youth” to “adult”.

There are many ways to think about this transition. There are gender specific aspects of becoming an “adult” and there are societal/institutional dimensions, ranging from access to alcohol to the right to vote to religious rites. The goal here is to articulate a multi-dimensional image of the nature and role of the passage from being a “youth” to being an “adult” and to identify specific symbols, acts or processes that mark and enable this change process. Of course the meaning of “youth” and “adult” are context specific, including the specificity of gender, location (rural, urban, etc.), authority systems, social signalling norms, etc. As we try to image how this transition happens in the future it will be important to analyse and invent the terms that give all three states – youth, transition, adult – meaning in context.

For instance we might describe the future of how a human, who is “not yet responsible” and is considered “dependent,” over time becomes able to take on “responsibility”, to be more “independent”, and is so recognized by people in relevant communities. Imagine, for the sake of illustrating the point, the fairly commonplace extrapolatory future depicted in many novels and films, of technologically “enhanced” humans who are designed in such a way that when they are born they are capable of speaking many languages and can access Wikipedia directly (wifi to the

brain). Would this mean that they are born with the ability to take responsibility for themselves, act independently to ensure their physiological well-being, and construct the social inter-dependencies that once upon a time were only within the reach of chronologically much older humans? In this fanciful example, might humans “babies” be born to a status that was once called “adult”? And might not such a future redefine “childhood”, so that being an “adult” has a different meaning in this society – unrelated to the rights and rites of being able to vote or go into a bar or get married?



Of course there is no way to answer these questions, none of us can go visit the future and then come back knowing what it will be like. Instead we imagine the future by using different kinds of anticipatory systems – such as the science fiction type “story” above. In this Futures Literacy Knowledge Laboratory we are going to use the idea

of “the later than now” or “the future” as a conceptual device to spark our imaginations. The FL Uknowlab is designed to assist us through structured conversation and reflection to collectively identify and invent the anticipatory assumptions¹ that at once enable us to imagine the future and to make choices in the present. This FL Uknowlab conversation is contextually specific, not only because we are a distinctive group of people, meeting in a particular place and at given moment in time, but also because from a wide range of perspectives the idea and practice of the transition from “youth” to “adult” is evolving.

Today there is widespread evidence of creative and experimentally driven changes in what it means to be young, old, or able in the “eyes of society” to take on specific responsibilities in specific communities/contexts. In communities around the world there are experiments taking place that offer fertile ground for inventing and discovering new forms and relationships of the transition from youth to adult. Novel approaches and hybrids are springing up, offering different ways of defining social status and new symbols, rites and codes that provide both self-identification and societal recognition of such transitions.

All of this points to the importance of opening up what we imagine to be the future of the transition from youth to adult. If we imagine tomorrow’s adult living their responsibility and inter-dependence differently than today, what does that mean for the rites of passage we are reproducing and reinventing today? If we think that in the future it might be workable for young people to demonstrate, not through chronological age but through evaluated achievements, like being able to tell new stories, when they are ready to be politically active, then maybe we need to rethink the link between adulthood and the processes for granting the right to political status in the community. In a nutshell, by imagining the future we change the way we understand the present. This is one way to assist with a fuller appreciation of the potential of the present. This FL Uknowlab is carefully designed to achieve this objective.

¹ Anticipatory assumptions cover a range of different elements that enable conscious thought to imagine the future.

The process

The design of the FL Uknowlab starts from the premise that everyone uses the future everyday. People use the future in the sense that they develop and deploy anticipatory assumptions, from such simple ones, as the sun will rise tomorrow, to more vague ones like I hope my high school diploma will be useful. Anticipation is part of everything around us; it is a defining attribute of a universe in which time and space are in constant motion, for instance part of what defines our planet is lateness and elsewhere-ness. So it is not surprising that trees display a form of anticipation when leaves fall off as winter approaches. And of course humans practice many forms of anticipation, including non-conscious anticipation that occurs when our immune system prepares for a threat. Conscious anticipation also takes many forms, from simple tracking of a moving object and imagining where its trajectory and speed might take it, helpful if you want to avoid being hit by a bus, to dreaming up elaborate images of tomorrow after you win the lottery. These imaginary futures play a key role in our conscious efforts to figure out what is going on around us, make choices about what is most important to pay attention to, and select which assumptions we use to justify our actions. [Of course conscious anticipation is not the only factor influencing our sense making and decision-making in the present but it is often a very important one.]

The aim of this FL Uknowlab is to give participants an opportunity to learn about anticipatory systems, how we use the future, by considering an important topic – the future of the transition from youth to adult. The common design element of the FL Uknowlab is that it follows a learning curve sequence that is intended to engage the collective intelligence of participants. The idea of collective intelligence is that everyone knows things, not always explicitly or articulately, and that when we make an effort to share meaning we are obliged to clarify and seek shared meaning. Through this conversational process information is revealed, new meanings and even phenomena invented and shared sense making emerges. Of course this is incomplete and biased in many ways, but since it is collective it is also more diverse, at a minimum in terms of different points-of-view due to age or gender or personal history, and it offers the potential of making explicit specific, time-place unique, information that the participants carry with them into the conversation. This is one of the reasons why the creation of knowledge through collective intelligence processes (knowlabs) is a source for researching (inventing, surfacing, presencing) the anticipatory assumptions that we use to imagine the future.

In practical chronological terms the FL Uknowlab discussion moves through three phases:

- In the first phase you will be asked to think about predictions and hopes. Predictions are about what you think is most likely to take place – a snapshot of rites of passage in the long-run future. Your best guess if someone asked you to make a bet. Like the drinking age will be increased to 25. Hopes are about your values: for instance would you like to see changes in what it means to be an adult and how it is signalled to the society around us? Something like a reputation score on Facebook.
- In the second phase we leave behind probable and desirable futures to experiment with a discontinuous framework, a new set of colours and brushes for painting an [imaginary] image of the future of the transition from youth to adult. This alternative framework will be provided as a sort of new palette for you to experiment with – it is a model of a Learning-

Intensive Society that significantly alters the way society functions and hence also institutions, processes and symbols, like rites of passage and the nature and organization of the transition from youth to adult. To be clear, there is no suggestion that this Learning-Intensive Society is likely to happen or is even desirable; the point is to first liberate our imaginations from the constraints of prediction and current norms by playing with paradigmatically discontinuous futures, and second, to experience more fully the power of our anticipatory assumptions in shaping not only the futures we imagine but our perceptions of the present.

- Finally, in the third phase the conversation moves to a comparative examination of the way anticipatory assumptions influence our understanding of the present and how specific images of the future make meaningful or visible different aspects of the present. In this last phase the challenge is to think of new questions, ones that might have been considered unimportant or incomprehensible without an effort to generate different anticipatory assumptions.

Having worked our way through the FL Uknowlab process there are hopefully some fairly clear outcomes:

- The first is what we will learn about each other. Because we are talking about the future we will be sharing our hopes and fears, expectations and doubts. We will discover points in common and differences.
- Second, tacit knowledge will have been made explicit and a range of different aspects of the present, including internal specifics like emotions and personal history, will become part of the anticipation data set (what we know about how we use the future and what we imagine about the future).
- Third, in a sort of self-conscious way (meta-cognition), participation in this process, where anticipation is brought out into the open as the way the future exists in the present, offers a learning-by-doing entry point into an expanded understanding of anticipation (models, systems, processes) – what might be called Futures Literacy.
- Fourth, we will have learnt something about the anticipatory assumptions we use to think about the future of the transition from youth to adult and perhaps managed to pose some new questions about this topic.
- Finally, particular to this event as part of the UNESCO Project: Scoping Global/Local Anticipatory Capacities, we will be collecting data on participant's anticipatory systems in terms of networks or specific communities of practice and which methods or specific aspects of the Discipline of Anticipation are used or suggested during the process.

Agenda
January 13, 2014
Day 1

10:00 – 10:45 Session 1	Welcome, outline of the purpose of the event and an introduction to the process. Quick personal introductions.
10:45 – 13:00 Session 2	<p>Phase 1 Futures Literacy: expectations/predictions, hopes/desires. A facilitated group discussion of the future of the transition from youth to adult.</p> <p>Most likely – Each participant writes a post-it note that captures some aspect of the transition from youth to adult in 2040</p> <p>Roundtable – each person presents their ideas.</p> <p>Group discussion of the composite picture, analysis of the picture using “layered analysis” categories – litany, protagonist, system, myth.</p> <p>Hopes/Desires – Each participant writes a post-it note that captures some aspect of the transition from youth to adult in 2040</p> <p>Roundtable – each person presents their ideas.</p> <p>Group discussion of the composite picture, analysis of the picture using “layered analysis” categories – litany, protagonist, system, myth.</p>
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch
14:30 – 15:15 Session 3	Plenary session – groups report back
15:15 – 16:00 Session 4	Phase 2 Futures Literacy: Imagining the transition from youth to adult in a Learning-Intensive Society.
16:15 – 18:00 Session 5	Phase 2 group work: repeat phase 1 group process: post-it note, roundtable, discussion using layered analysis categories.

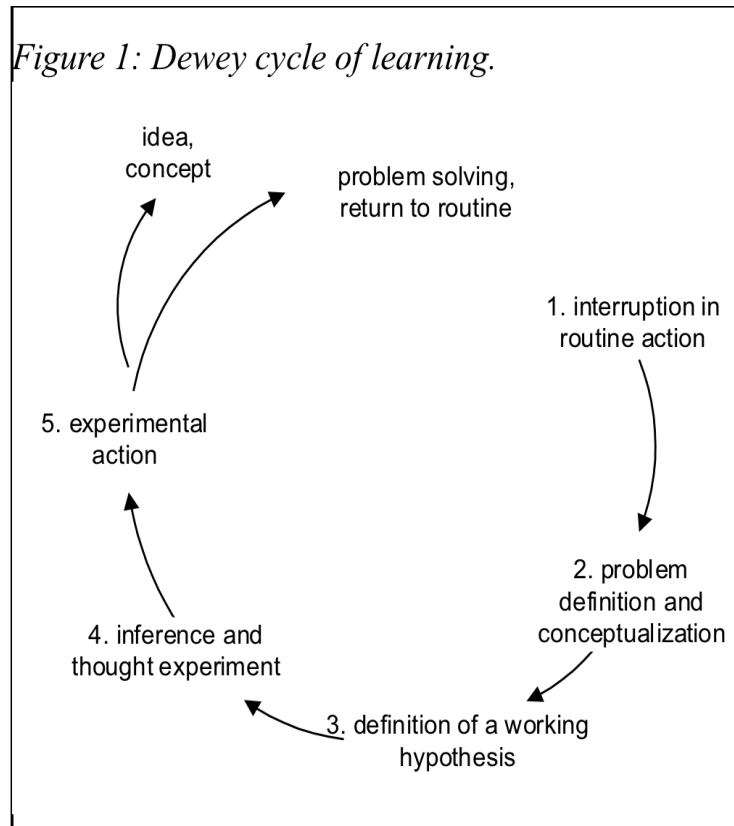
End of Day 1 (for those willing and able, dinner is planned)

January 14, 2014

Day 2

9:30 – 11:00 Session 6	Phase 2 “materialization”: Groups invent “plays” or mock-ups of the youth to adult transition in the Learning Intensive Society of 2040.
11:00 – 12:00 Session 7	Plenary session – groups report back
12:00 – 13:00 Session 8	Phase 3 review anticipatory assumptions: Group work on asking new questions in light of the differences between the anticipatory assumptions of phase 1 and phase 2.
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch
14:30 – 15:30 Session 9	Plenary session – groups report back
15:30 – 16:15 Session 10	Open discussion, comments and feedback on the group presentations
16:15 – 16:30 Session 11	Wrap-up overview of the process and the Discipline of Anticipation
16:30 – 17:00 Session 12	Evaluation.

Annex



List of Participants

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Richard Sandford	Northhover Research, Singapore and Bristol University, UK
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John Crowley	SHS UNESCO, Paris, France
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