

Futures Thinking Fundamentals

Building futures-capable public service

Dr Ine Steenmans

UCL STEaPP | Director of Policy Engagement

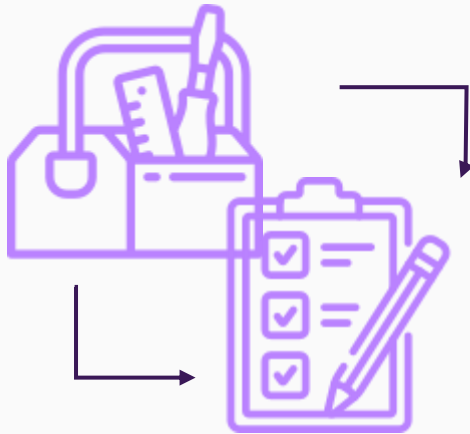


Apolitical Masterclass 23 April 2025



Developing futures thinking

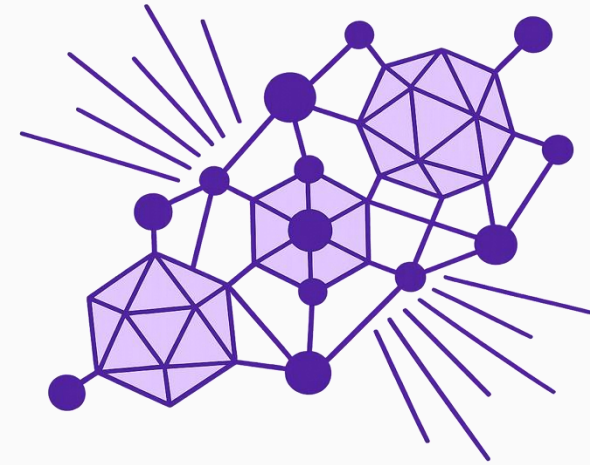
Dominant paradigm: Knowledge Transfer



Teaches frameworks, vocabulary, methods. Fills the mind with rules of futures/foresight.

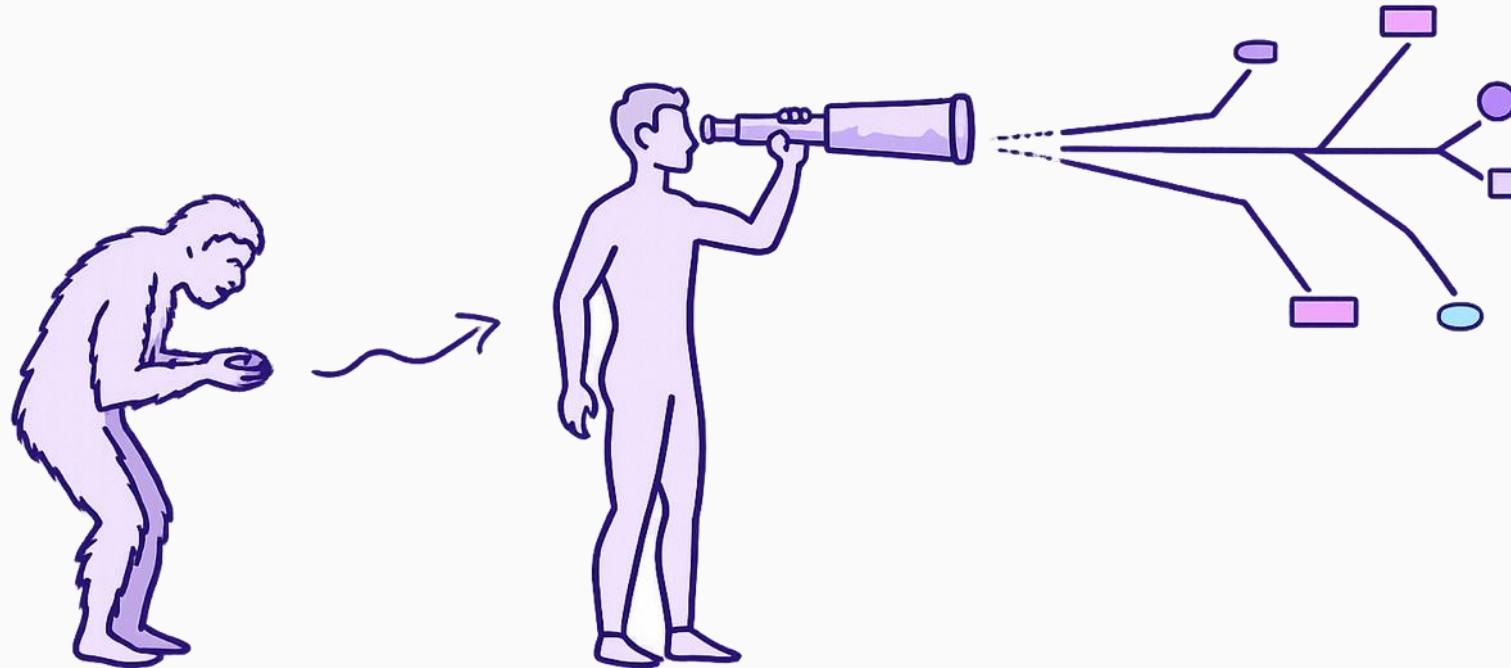
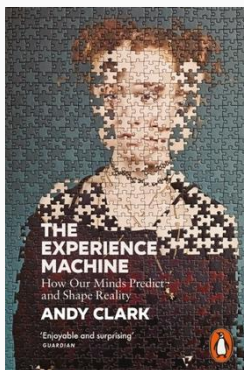
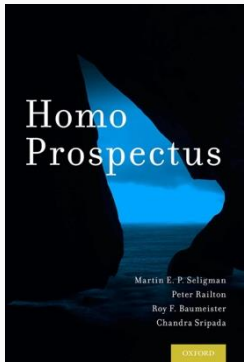
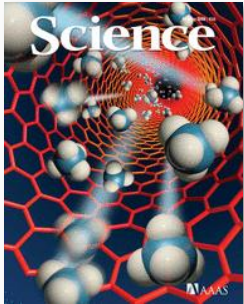


The goal: Capacity Building



Build the underlying biological and cognitive capacity that makes those methods work

You are already a phenomenal futures prediction machine

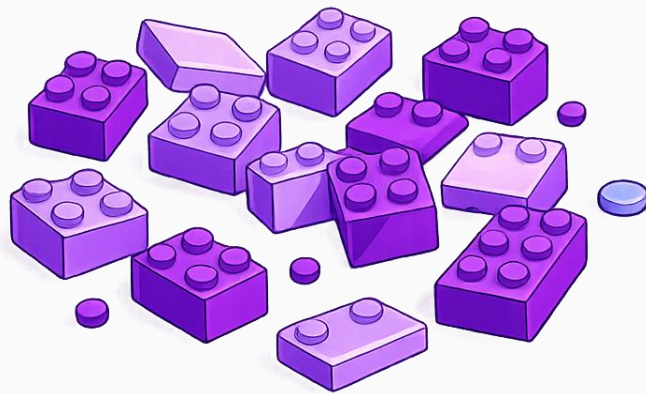


Mentally simulation of possible futures is an evolutionarily defining thing our brains do. Your brain continually generates simulations of what comes next to minimise surprise.

We are not primarily a *knowing* being (Homo Sapiens)
We are functionally a *prospecting* being (Homo Prospectus)

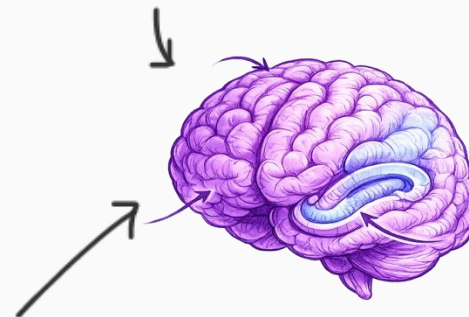
How it works

**The past:
building blocks**



**The brain:
assembling**

Indexes and pulls relevant memory fragments (hippocampus)



Stages and provides context (medial temporal lobe)

Stitches fragments together and evaluates (medial prefrontal cortex)

**The future:
a simulation**



If we all have this capacity for futures thinking, why can it be so hard to use at work?



Three structural off-switches for futures thinking capacity

	1. Rewards for certainty 	2. Squeeze of the long-term	3. Methods performance
Mechanism	Rewarding confident over honest answers is rewarded culturally (media, ministers, performance reviews etc – legitimate demands).	Perception and structural governance where that thinking more long, distant, broadly about futures is different labour to what immediate job requires. (e.g. annual budgets clashing with decades-long demographic change)	We run futures workshops and projects without meaningful anticipatory cognition. Methods are vehicles for futures thinking,
Outcome	But accumulation of legitimate demands for certainty makes exploratory thinking and ambiguity a personal cost when you say ‘we don’t know yet’.	Upstream futures thing is treated as optional ‘indulgency’ or luxury cost. 	We end up with credible outputs but little institutional capacity for anticipatory governance. 

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Where this week have you seen one of those three things show up in your own work?

What can we do?

Individually

Engage experience deliberately

Give brain more lego pieces. Break policy siloes, visit frontline, read outside brief.

Unstructured time

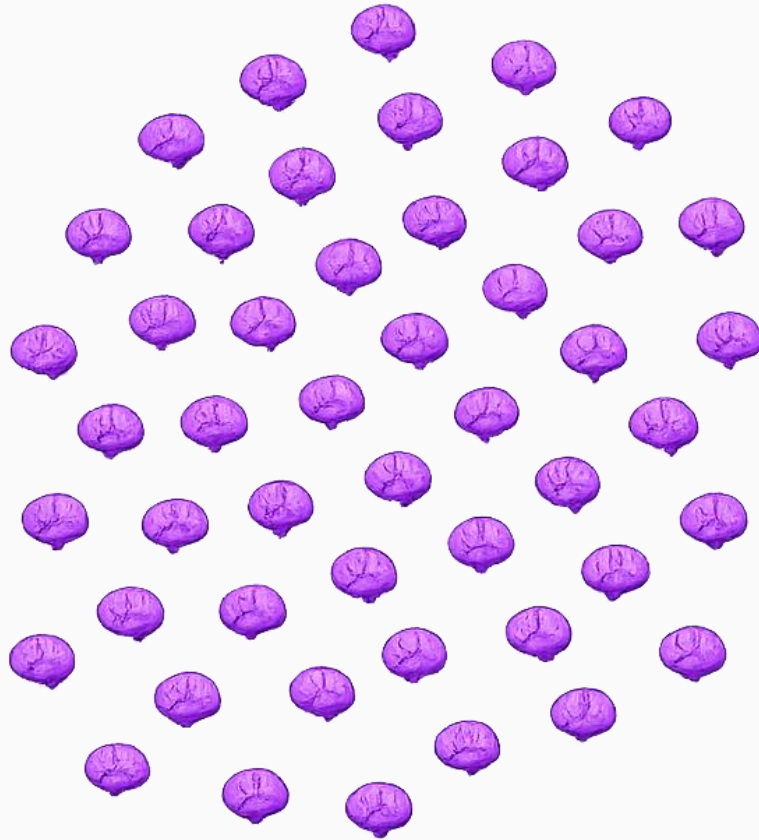
Give yourself time to think without structure. The brain parts active in prospection do well when not focused on immediate task. E.g. walk, sit with notebook. Give permission to think.

Tangible artifacts

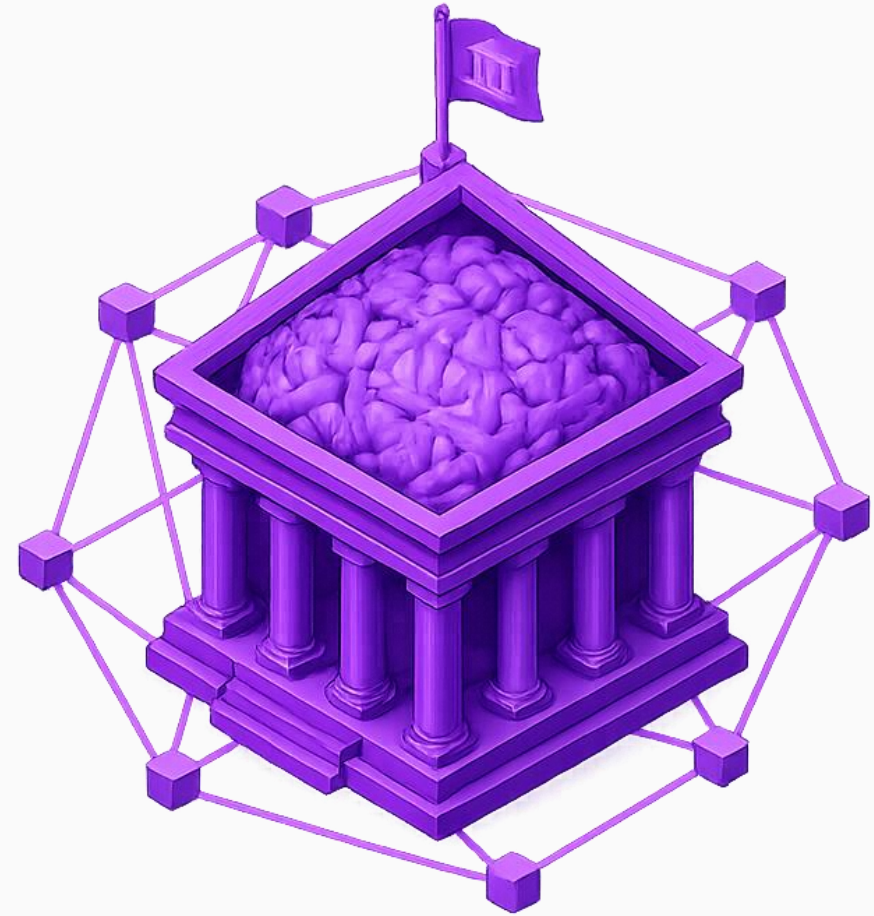
Externalise the futures simulation. Use physical prototypes, sketches. This makes fluid mental models accessible for scrutiny



From individual to collective: a policy futures puzzle



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Collectively

Productive failure

Permit a wrong first draft.
Institutionalise formative struggle.

Psychological safety

Remove penalty for admitting uncertainty.
How many said 'honestly, I don't know'?

Shared purpose

Avoid abstract mapping, and ground with asking 'what are we trying to make possible with futures thinking?'

Institutional memory

Knowledge management is futures thinking infrastructure. Organisations need to remember their pasts.



What can we do for better futures thinking?

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What would have to be true for us to be completely wrong about this?

This simple tool for futures thinking doesn't need a budget, an expert, a workshop. Just some space and courage to not know.

