

Imagining the Future of Higher Education

Designing a Workshop for Futures Thinking
and Integrating AI with Intention

Welcome!

This Open Educational Resource will help you execute a workshop for participants to imagine a future based on signals of change.

This workshop intentionally uses generative AI to shortening the pathway to learn about futures scenario creation. AI is both a tool and a subject of this workshop. The workshop teaches and elicits reflection both on the contents of the scenario to think about where this skill might be useful to participants and about the costs, benefits and effects of using AI at this point in the process.

What do we need to keep in mind as we explore the future?

The Futures we explore are:

1. Imaginary designed by extrapolating possibilities from the patterns of change we see today.
2. Created to give a “tangible” experience of what a possible future could be like.
3. Intentionally provocative; their purpose is to spark critical and creative conversations and reflections about future possibilities.

The Futures we explore are not:

1. Proposals of what should exist.
2. Endorsements of patterns of change.
3. Endorsements of specific technologies or objects.

Preparation

This facilitation guide will guide you lead an exploration of the futures of postsecondary education and help you start conversations about implications and actions.

Why Use Foresight?

In today's rapidly changing world, strategic foresight helps create pathways to different futures, aiding in path creation, change management, and effective decision-making. It enhances lateral thinking, increasing an organization's capacity to navigate complexity, set strategic directions, and build resilience and agility.

With the significant disruption in Higher Education due to Artificial Intelligence, a foresight workshop can help the postsecondary community imagine future changes in an engaging environment. This process fosters development of personal visions of desired futures and enhances the sense of agency to work towards these goals, considering the opportunities and challenges of future technology, including Artificial intelligence

What is included in this Guide?

Facilitation Guide: for a workshop that explores of higher education with the Futures Wheel, and AI generated scenarios. The guide includes:

- Step-by-step guide to doing Futures Wheel ideation.
- A fill-in-the-blanks framework for the discussion and that can be copied and pasted into GenAI to elicit scenario generated based on the discussions.
- Sample slides.
- Lessons learned from initial experience sharing this OER.

Who created this resource to explore the future?

This open educational resource was developed by the eCampusOntario Research and Foresight and Open Library teams in order to guide novices through foresight discovery and learning.

Why use an OER?

This facilitation guide is structured as an Open Educational Resource (OER). OERs are a powerful response to the rising costs and accessibility challenges in higher education and in the field of planning AI processes. OER provide free, high-quality learning materials that reduce financial barriers for students. OERs are clearly licensed and easily adaptable, making them ideal for emerging fields like AI and futures thinking, where materials must evolve rapidly and reflect diverse perspectives (Hilton, 2016). Publishing this facilitation guide as an OER ensures that others can adopt, adapt, and build upon the work, extending its potential impact.

This facilitation guide is openly licenced CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0, allowing others to freely use, adapt, and redistribute the materials with appropriate credit for additional institutional or cultural contexts.

Imaging Futures with the Futures Wheel Methodology

The futures wheel futures imagining process that essentially asks, “what could happen next?” twice or three times in a row. In this workshop the facilitator takes participants through the steps of imagining how a small change, or signal, pulled from the recent news could change how the world looks in the future.

What implications could result from the trends previously explored? What else would change as a direct or indirect consequence?

The Futures Wheel, created by Jerome Glenn, is a method for graphic visualization of direct and indirect future consequences of a particular change or development. With it, you can discuss long-term implications of a trend in a structured way. The use of interconnecting lines makes it possible to visualize interrelationships of the causes and resulting changes.

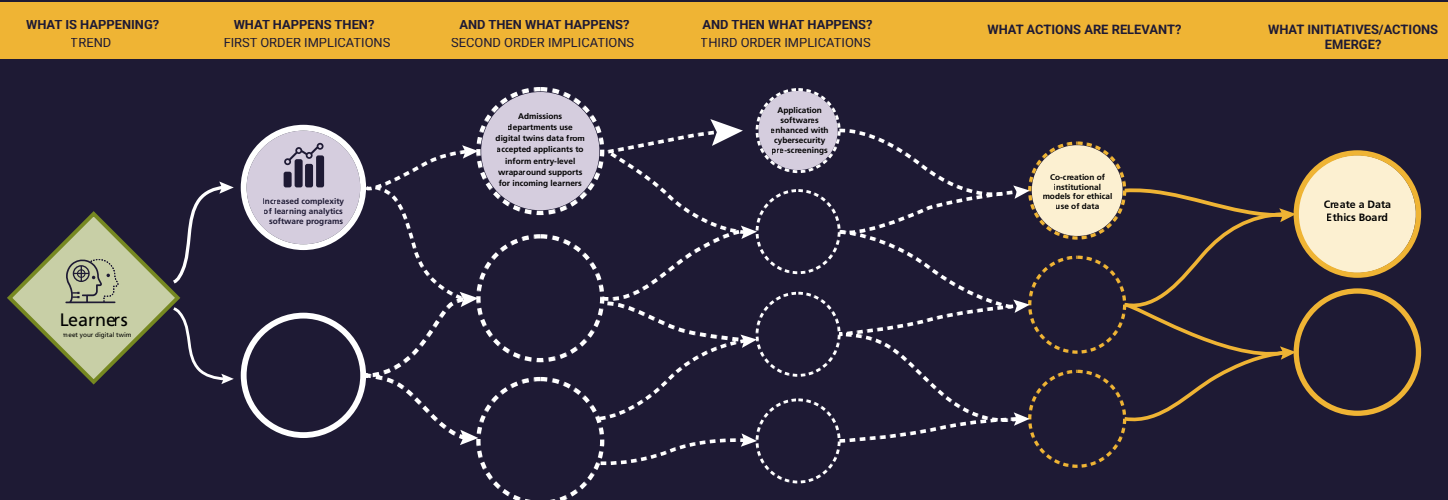
The Futures Wheel can act as a conversation guide to develop a set of initiatives and plausible directions that are based on the potential futures that might emerge and map new areas of focus, implications, and effects of any trend or driver on the existing system.

To illustrate the use of the Futures Wheel, we used the trend “Learners: meet your digital twin” as the spark to map changes and future implications

on postsecondary education. By listing possible implications, we can create new initiatives and avenues that address the rising change.

How to use the Futures Wheel?

- ◇ Choose a trend that you would like to analyze
- Brainstorm possible direct, first-order consequences of the selected trend for you roles/ context/department/institution/sector, etc.
- Brainstorm indirect, second-order consequences of the first-order consequences.
- Brainstorm indirect, third-order consequences of the second-order consequences.
- Brainstorm actions that would be relevant to address any level of the implications brainstormed.
- Synthesize initiatives that would be key to connect present and future needs given your long-term analysis of implications and relevant actions.



Positioning the Workshop

Positioning a workshop effectively is crucial for setting the tone, expectations, and engagement level of participants. A well-positioned introduction helps facilitators clarify the workshop's purpose, connect it to current challenges, and highlight its relevance to participants' professional and personal contexts.

Introducing the Landscape: Issues Facing Higher Education

If your participants are from higher education themselves, they will probably be able to provide you with very relevant and nuanced examples of issues facing higher education. Consider involving their perspectives in the tuning of the themes the workshop explores.

However, in general as this facilitation guide is being written, higher education is undergoing profound transformation, shaped by issues such as accessibility, financial constraints, evolving labor market needs, and the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence. These factors are changing how institutions operate, how educators teach and conduct research, and how students prepare for an uncertain future. In this context, educators must not only react to change but also anticipate and help define it.

Why Futures Thinking Is Challenging, and Why Storytelling Helps

Thinking about the future is cognitively and emotionally demanding. The future often feels abstract, disconnected, or impersonal, making it hard to visualize and act upon. This distance can limit participants' sense of agency and motivation. Storytelling is a powerful tool to bridge this gap: by inviting participants to project themselves into a narrative, especially one with relatable,

personal details, they can engage emotionally, form connections, and retain information more effectively. Storytelling also strengthens agency, acting as a "mirror, map, and catalyst"* that aligns future visions with present values and actions. In this workshop, the Futures Wheel method is used to map the cascading impacts of change, and then these insights are transformed into a narrative scenario ("A day in the life of..."). This approach makes the future feel more tangible and actionable, helping participants reflect on whether a given future is desirable and what steps might be taken to move toward or away from it.

The current state of AI in Higher Education

Artificial intelligence is evolving at an extraordinary pace, often portrayed as both a revolutionary tool and a disruptive threat. While some predictions about AI's impact have not fully materialized, the conversation has shifted toward strategic adoption: "AI won't replace you, but someone who knows how to use it will." So how do you learn where to use it in a thoughtful, strategic manner?

This workshop is an opportunity to use generative AI to support learning the futures wheel methodology and employs reflection questions to help participants evaluate whether this is a good location for them to use AI in their own work.

* Absentofi. (2025). The Long Journey Home – Envisioning the Future: Storytelling as a Mirror, Map, and Catalyst. <https://absentofi.org/2025/02/the-long-journey-home-envisioning-the-future-storytelling-as-a-mirror-map-and-catalyst/>

Choosing Signals to Explore

What is a signal?

Signals are the building blocks of foresight work. They are small, observable changes or emerging patterns that may seem subtle or ambiguous at first but have the potential to shape the future in significant ways. Signals can come from anywhere: social media, news stories, policy changes, technological innovations, or everyday observations. In a rapidly changing world, signals are constantly appearing around us, each carrying the possibility (like a seed) to grow and influence the future of education in unexpected ways.

How is a signal used in Foresight?

In foresight practice, and especially in the Futures Wheel methodology, signals are used as starting points for exploration. Facilitators and participants select one signal at a time and imagine what might happen if that signal grows and flourishes in the future. Through structured discussion, the group maps out the direct and indirect impacts of the signal, considering how it could reshape systems, practices, and experiences in education. This process helps participants move beyond immediate reactions and think creatively and critically about long-term implications.

Hint: Linking Signals to Themes of Interest – this should be done before the workshop

When selecting signals to explore, it's helpful to connect them to the broader themes or areas of interest that matter most to your group. Themes might include topics like accessibility, technology, student experience, policy, or workforce development in education. By linking signals to these themes, facilitators can ensure that the exploration is relevant and meaningful for participants.

How to find pertinent Signals:

- Start with your themes: Review the main topics or challenges your group is interested in.
- Scan for signals: Look for signals (small changes, trends, or anomalies) that relate to these themes. For example, if your theme is "technology in education," a signal might be the rise of AI-powered tutoring tools.
- Ask guiding questions: "How might this signal impact our theme in the future?" or "What could happen if this signal grows and becomes widespread?"
- Map connections: Use the Futures Wheel or similar tools to visualize how a signal could influence your chosen theme, both directly and indirectly.

By intentionally linking signals to themes, facilitators help participants focus their creative energy and foresight on areas that are most relevant to their context, making the workshop outcomes more actionable and impactful.

Please see the optional prework survey for another idea for how to involve participants in theme and signal choice in preparation for the workshop.

Suggested Timeboxing and Steps of Workshop



20–60 mins



1+ participants

In-person or online and synchronous recommended

Workshop Outline:

Optional: Pre-Workshop Activity online (Sent 1 week prior)

Part 1

10min: Welcome & Orientation & warmup

Part 2

50min: Futures Wheel Activity

- Group Assignment (5 min) – GenAI Prompt Fill-in-the-blanks Discussion



» **Step 1:** Fill in Context within prompt (5 min)



» **Step 2:** Fill in the persona (5 min)



» **Step 3:** First Futures Wheel Rotation – Signals & First-Order Impacts (15 min)
Second Futures Wheel Rotation – Second-Order Impacts (15 min)



» **Step 4:** Copy and paste completed prompt to GenAI (5 min)

Part 3

20 min: Scenario Reflection & Strategic Response



» **Step 5:** Evaluate the changes and analyze reactions that this scenario elicits (5 min)
» Discuss actions that could be developed in light of these changes (15 min)

Part 4

20 min: Wrap-Up

- Share back.
- Discussion about futures thinking and integration of AI.
- Questions and Thanks.

Steps of Workshop

Optional pre-workshop request for opinions



Prior to workshop

To further personalize this workshop, articles of interest can be requested from the participants before the session. These can be used to personalize the topics of exploration in the session and to broaden the scope of the signals explored by having them come in from multiple sources (your participants).

This information could be requisitioned by email, or a simple survey. The resources have a high likelihood of being or pointing towards signals and can be used to find themes and potential changes to explore together.

Sample email:

Subject Line: Help our futures workshop reflect your experience in Higher Ed


We are asking participants to complete a brief survey in advance of our workshop. We are asking you to share websites of news articles, or anecdotes that you have observed related to any of the Themes of Interest:

- Research
- Innovation & Public-Private Partnerships
- Work-Integrated Learning
- Performance Development
- Other please specify

Thank you.


Steps of Workshop

Part 1: Welcome, Orientation & Warmup

 10 minutes

1. **Welcome** from facilitator.
2. **Overview** of workshop goals and structure and outcomes of the survey if applicable.
3. **Introduction** to Futures Thinking and the Futures Wheel.
4. **Discuss** how GenAI is currently being used in daily life.
5. **Warm up:**
 - » Pick a signal and extrapolate what might happen together.
 - » Or ask participants to provide a free flow of ideas to fill out a creative fill-in-the-blanks story.

Part 2: Futures Wheel Activity

 50 minutes

Group Assignment (5 mins)

- Participants are grouped by topic: Use the “GenAI prompt Fill-in-the-blanks template” for the following steps

1

Step 1:

- » Fill in exploration topic context within prompt (5 minutes)

2

Step 2:

- » **Fill in details about the persona that the scenario should explore (5 minutes)**

3

Step 3:

- » **First Rotation – Signals & First-Order Impacts (15 minutes)**

- Use signals, either from per-work, or prepared by facilitator.
- Imagine what the impact of the signal will be if it becomes the status quo. Use the prompt: “What happens if this change continues or scales?”
- Map first-order impacts using the Futures Wheel in a collaborative whiteboard tool such as Miro.

- » **Second Rotation – Second-Order Impacts (15 minutes)**

- Explore deeper consequences of the first-order impacts.
- Imagine what the impact of this new status quo would be, and what the next stage implications would be if this change continued to become more prominent. Use the prompt: “What happens if this change continues or scales?”
- Map second-order impacts on collaborative tool.

4

Step 4:

- » **Copy and paste completed prompt to GenAI (5 minutes)**

- Groups copy and paste their prompt into a GenAI of their choice to generate a speculative scenario per the prompt instructions based on the inputted details of the group discussions.
- Gen AI generates and returns a scenario for a day in the year 2045.

GenAI Prompt Fill-in-the-blanks Template

Hi Gen AI, please create the following for me.

Directions for AI	Participants answer here
This is the Theme of Interest, the topic that I want you to explore in this future scenario.	

I am interested in exploring the following Theme of Interest in higher education: I am exploring this Theme of Interest in a workshop where we are using the futures wheel methodology by J.C. Glenn to extrapolate first, and second order impacts from signals of change about this topic. I want to share the signals of change I am interested in, as well as the impacts that we imagine might happen in the future as a result of two futures wheel extrapolations.

Directions for AI	Participants answer here
Signal 1: article website and name of article	
Signal 1: What changes might result because of this in the future	
Signal 1: What might be the cascading affects because of this change. Specifically relating to higher education and the Theme of Interest	
Signal 2.... 3 [repeat three rows for each additional signal discussed]	

GenAI Prompt

Fill-in-the-blanks Template

With this topic and these extrapolated signals, I would like you to imagine what higher education might look like in this world in the year 2045. I would like you to imagine a scenario where the following individual inhabits this world. I am interested in exploring the following Theme of Interest in higher education: I am exploring this Theme of Interest in a workshop where we are using the futures wheel methodology by J.C. Glenn to extrapolate first, and second order impacts from signals of change about this topic. I want to share the signals of change I am interested in, as well as the impacts that we imagine might happen in the future as a result of two futures wheel extrapolations.

The details of this persona are as follows:

Directions for AI	Participants answer here
This person lives in:	
They work at the following invented institution:	
Their name is:	
Their role in 2025 is: (Gen AI please extrapolate what their role might be in 2045)	
Some boring facts about this person are (e.g.: "She does not know how to play pickleball" or "they enjoy their coffee black"):	
Any further details about the person	

Please synthesize these persona details and the extrapolated signals into a 200-250 word scenario about the day in the life of the person in this world.

Steps of Workshop

Part 3: Scenario Reflection & Strategic Response



20 minutes

5

Step 5:

- » Evaluate the changes and analyze reactions that this scenario elicits (5 minutes)
 - Groups read their AI-generated future and decide on a world name.
 - Groups reflects:
 - How is the Theme of Interest different in this new world of 2045?
 - Is this future desirable?
 - Groups share together: name of world, short amount of details, and if this is a desired future.
- » Discuss actions that could be developed in light of these changes (15 minutes)
 - Identify tools, partnerships, and system changes needed to:
 - Embrace desirable futures.
 - Avoid undesirable ones.

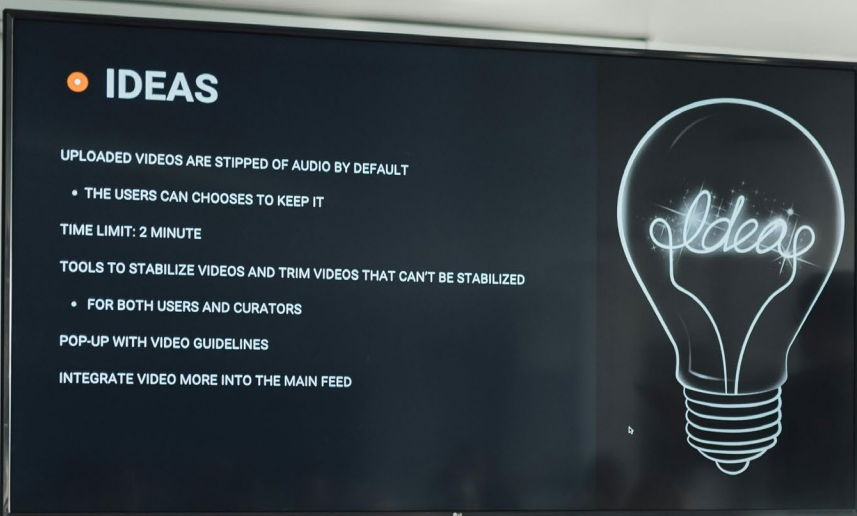
Part 4: Wrap-up



20 minutes

- Each group shares one key insight or takeaway, 1 min rapid-fire.
- Optional discussion about futures thinking and integration of AI.
- Thanks.

Reflection prompts on the scenario and method	Reflection prompts on use of GenAI in this workshop
How do you feel about this future scenario that was created for you?	What was the impact of the AI simplification of this learning path?
Does this scenario feel like a plausible future 20 years from now?	Is this a place you would consider using AI in the future?
Does it feel like this future flows naturally out of the signals you explored and discussions you had in this workshop?	Can you see how the future scenario arises from the conversations or signal extrapolations that you created?
Does it give you a better idea than you had before about a <u>possible future</u> of higher education?	Would you be interested in creating your own scenario from a Futures Wheel discussion of signals without the help of AI?
Does this future resonate with you?	



Sample Slides

Sample Slides

Slide 1: Example of a fill-in-the-blanks story for optional warm up.

A noun (linked to education)

A verb (linked to learning and teaching)

A adverb






A technology (real or imaginary)

A location

The [a **NOUN** linked to education] of tomorrow will [a **VERB** linked to teaching or learning] in a [an **ADVERB**] manner, using [a **TECHNOLOGY** either real or imaginary] in [a **PLACE**]

Slide 2: Process that the workshop will follow with visual progress bar.

Order of Events

Define	Persona	Exploration Collective	GenAI	Reflection
Define the key theme	Create a profile of a fictional character	Use the Futures Wheel	Create a scenario using AI	Reflect on the scenario and the process
				

Sample Slides

Slide 3: Slide to describe the questions to answer when providing the context for the theme of Interest. The topic chosen for this iteration was how AI is being used in higher education.

Define

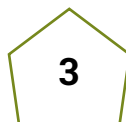
AI is making its way into classrooms, administrative systems, and student life.
What are you hearing, seeing, or experiencing that feels important or concerning?



Slide 4: Slide to describe the steps to follow when creating the person to inhabit the scenario of the fill-in-the-blanks prompt.

Persona

Describe a person who is currently playing a role in the postsecondary education landscape.
» Not your, but someone you can identify with.



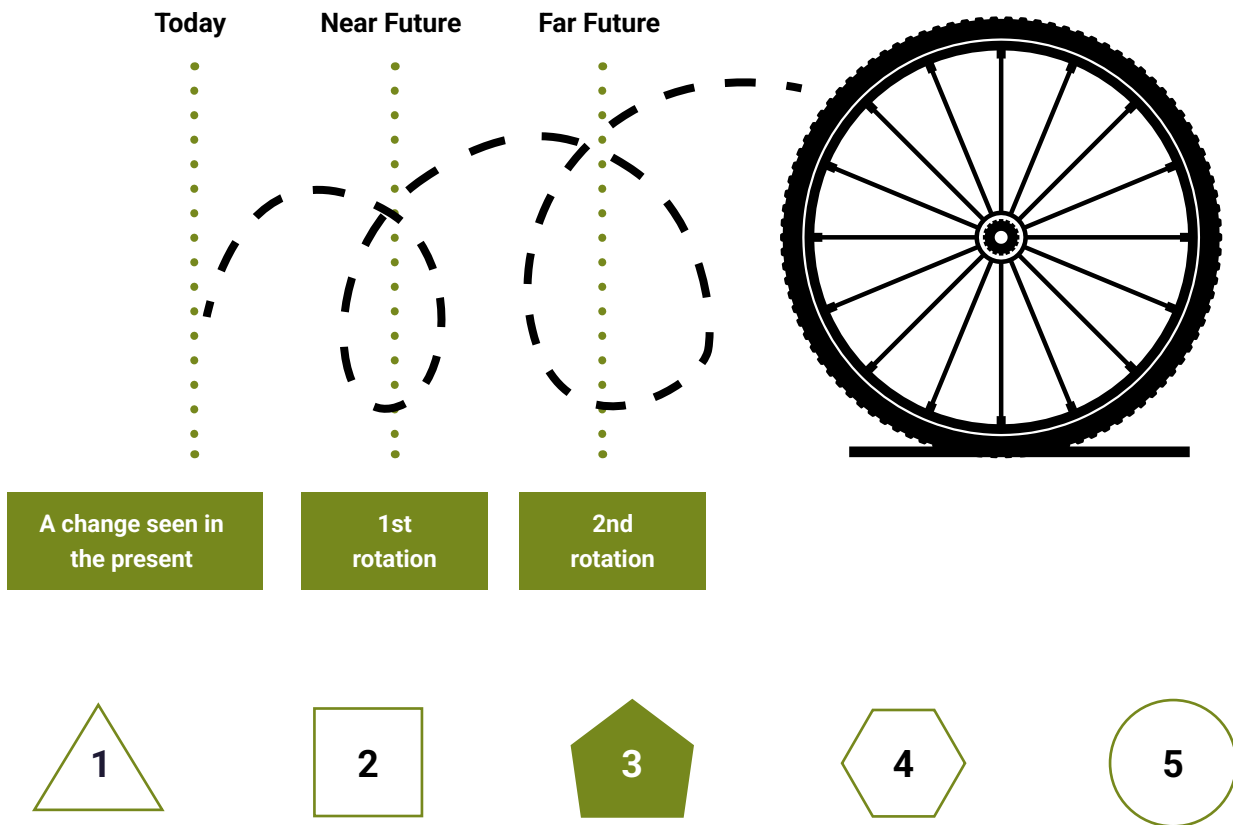
Sample Slides

Slide 5: Slide showing the steps to completing the futures wheel and helps walk through an example (next 6 slides).

Imagine the future together with the Futures Wheel.

What happens next?

Example: AI chatbots help students do their homework



Sample Slides

Slide 6:

Imagine the future together with the Futures Wheel.

Step A: Describe the change

Step B: Change A has become the new normal. What would happen next?

If this change continues or intensifies, what could happen?

1st rotation =
Direct consequences

Step C : The consequences of B happen. What would happen next?

If these direct consequences occur, what could happen afterward?

2nd rotation =
Indirect consequences



Slide 7:

Do 1st round together

Futures Wheel – Description

A : Describe the change in your own words.

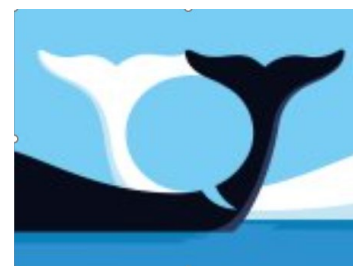
Change:

There is evidence that animals have language, with distinct dialects.

An AI called Ceti is working on sperm whale communication and has already identified a click that may function as punctuation. The goal is to decode the entire sperm whale language by end of 2026.

Your task:

- Describe this change in your own words.
- Why is it important or interesting to you?



<https://www.snexplores.org/article/artificial-intelligence-animal-language-technology>



Sample Slides

Slide 8:

Do together

Futures Wheel – 1st Rotation

B : Change A has become the new normal. What would happen next?

Imagine:

- What changes might we see over the next 1 to 3 years if this signal continues to grow?
- What new practices, policies, or technologies might emerge?
- What different measures might institutions begin to take?

These are the direct consequences of the normalization of this change.



Slide 9:

Do together

Futures Wheel – 2nd Rotation

C : The consequences of B happen. What would happen next?

Imagine:

- How students, professors or administrators react or adapt?
- What new goals or opportunities might appear?
- What sectors or industries outside of education could be influenced?

These are the indirect consequences of the normalization of this change.



Sample Slides

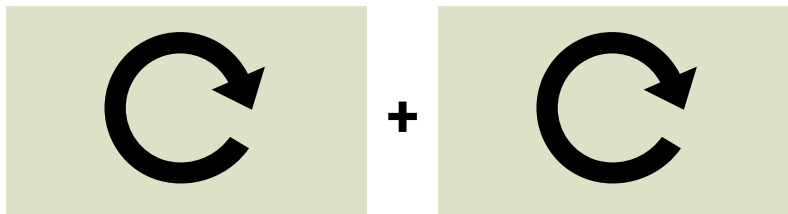
Slide 10:

Repeat the Futures Wheel Methodology x 1-2

Step A: Describe the change

Step B: Change A has become the new normal. What would happen next?

Step C : The consequences of B happen. What would happen next?



Slide 11:

How to get the prompts into generative AI.

GenAI

Copy and paste our work into the GenAI platform of your choice to create a future scenario based on our work.



Sample Slides

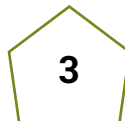
Slide 12:

High level reflection questions about the workshop.

Reflections

Reflect on the scenarios

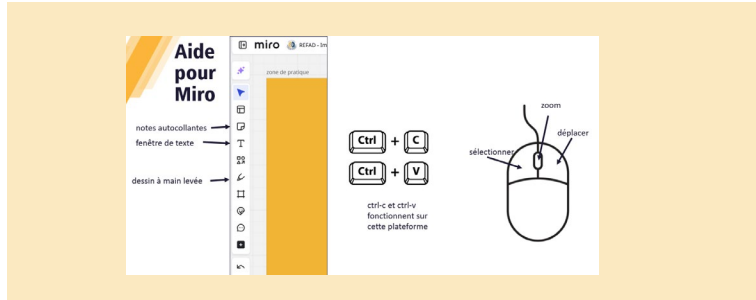
Reflect on the impact of the
use of AI in this process



Proposed Miro Board Layout for Workshop

Map of Miro Board

Practice zone and instructions for Miro



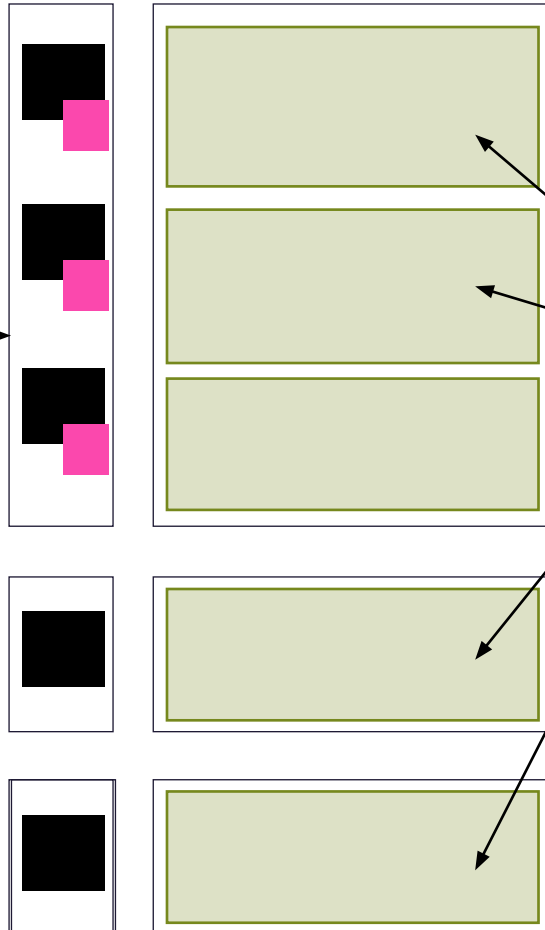
Workshop steps (for reference)



Numbers matching steps to workspace



Instructions in black
Examples in pink
(on the left side)



Workspace on the right to share stickies

Reflections from Running Workshop...



**This workshop
was run at
REFAD in
October 2025.**

Upon reflection several key insights emerged:

Extending the session length to two hours may be more effective, as it would allow more time for debriefing, reviewing the activity's mechanisms, and discussing how participants can implement or adapt the approach in their own work; otherwise, facilitators need to be very strict with timing.

Running the workshop in a hybrid format presented notable challenges, particularly in coordinating hearing and participation across online and in person participants. In person participants were more likely to speak together and jump off of each others' ideas creating collaborative discussion during the extrapolation of the signals, but taking notes of the conversations to put it into the prompt template was more difficult than with online groups. Appointing a scribe helped for in person sessions.

Experimenting with different AI programs was engaging and added variety to the experience. Some groups chose to create videos of their stories, and while the spoken words tended to resonate more deeply, the videos offered an interesting and creative dimension.

For workshops with multiple groups, having a roaming moderator available to assist with technical issues proved helpful and could be recommended for future sessions.

Bibliography

The slides included in this guide were presented during le Grand rassemblement Automne 2025 du Réseau d'enseignement francophone à distance (REFAD), October 2025 and the rationale behind the creation of this OER is a paper in TELUQ's Médiations et médiatisations to be published in Feb 2026.

The following OER's were referenced and remixed in the creation of this document:

eCampusOntario. (2022). Ubiquitous Learning: From Anywhere, At Anytime. https://www.ecampusontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Ubiquitous-Learning_04_EN_20221117_Tagged_Fixed.pdf

eCampusOntario. (2025). Thing from the Future of Higher Education, AI Edition. <https://ecampusontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/REF-1002-2025-EN-Game-Thing-from-the-Future-AI-Edition.pdf>