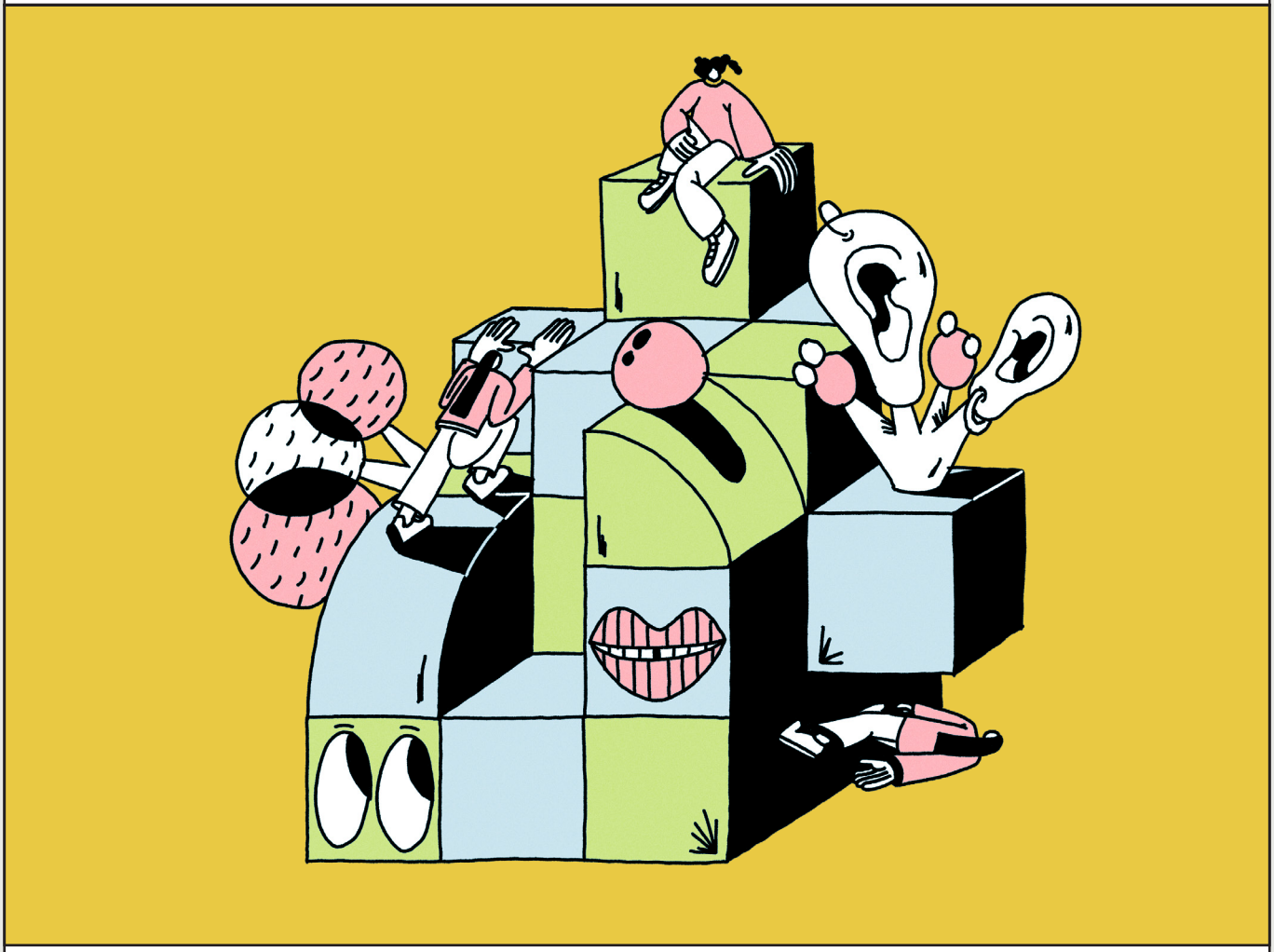


Transform future language

Deconstruct and reconstruct future metaphors

This exercise invites you to uncover the hidden assumptions and concepts within the language used in relation to digital future(s). Test and reflect on language-reflexive and critical approaches to thinking about the future.

⧖	45–60 min	★★★	advanced
👥	alone or in groups	✎	printouts and pens

INTRO	Transform future language	2

> "Future exists only as a linguistically formulated future. [...] This is because we don't have current physical or scientific access to the future since no one can observe future presences [...]. And due to our lack of linguistic access with regard to the future, the way we talk about the future today is of crucial importance."
>
> Grunwald, A. (2009) *Wovon ist die Zukunftsforschung eine Wissenschaft?*

This exercise is dedicated to challenging inherent assumptions and current reality to uncover alternative worldviews. By examining common metaphors and narratives, foundations of our thinking can be uncovered and challenged. Metaphors are figures of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. Through transforming metaphors and myths associated with narratives, the present can be reframed and new futures can be opened.

When we think and talk about the future, we use concepts of the past to imagine and explain future developments. Our construction of reality takes place through communication, which in turn shapes our view of the world through metaphors. Metaphors can describe new phenomena by describing one kind of thing in terms of another – yet they carry normative implications that shape our thoughts and are further cultivated through discourse.

ASSIGNMENT	In this assignment, *Causal Layered Analysis* is introduced. Deconstruct and reconstruct metaphors about the digital future and practice language-reflexive and critical approaches to thinking about the future.
LEARNING GOAL	This exercise invites you to uncover the hidden assumptions and concepts within our language and discourses around digital futures. You will gain awareness of how language shapes our understanding of the world. By completing this exercise you will be able to create transformative spaces for the creation of alternative futures.
PREPARATION	Print out the canvas and bring sufficient pens.

EXAMPLE

Data is the new gold

What is the source domain on which the metaphor is built?

"Data is the new gold" is a resource-based metaphor ("Goldrush" metaphor). The economic potential of data can be harnessed for private or public benefit.

What normalities and "self-evident" facts are conveyed?

Data is seen as a material that can be exploited for profit (profit thinking).

What does the metaphor hide?

The exploration and extraction of oil and gold is a highly skilled and capital-intensive activity.

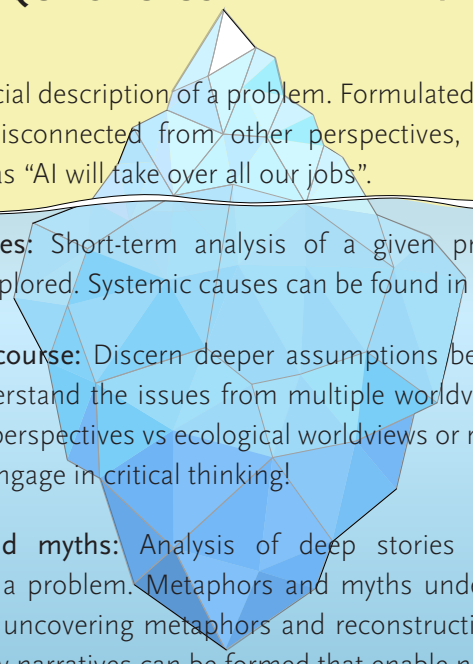
What connotations does the metaphor entail?

It could also be seen as a natural metaphor, implicitly implying that data is "naturally beyond political control". It further suggests that the exploitation of resources results in prosperity.

LETS'S START

This assignment is focused on the 4th layer of *Causal Layered Analysis*: Metaphors and Myths.

THE TECHNIQUE OF CAUSAL LAYERED ANALYSIS



Litany: The official description of a problem. Formulated as an externalised reality, often disconnected from other perspectives, e.g. a newspaper headline such as "AI will take over all our jobs".

Systemic causes: Short-term analysis of a given problem. Historical variables are explored. Systemic causes can be found in e.g. policy reports.

Worldview/discourse: Discern deeper assumptions behind the problem and try to understand the issues from multiple worldviews/perspectives, e.g. neoliberal perspectives vs ecological worldviews or rational vs spiritual perspectives. Engage in critical thinking!

Metaphors and myths: Analysis of deep stories and unconscious dimensions of a problem. Metaphors and myths underpin and support worldviews. By uncovering metaphors and reconstructing them into new metaphors, new narratives can be formed that enable new solutions.

MANUAL	Transform future language	4
STEP 1	What metaphors of digitalisation come to mind? Choose a metaphor about digitalisation that interests you, or pick one from the following: ▪ web ▪ platform ▪ data is the new gold ▪ digital player ▪ cloud ▪ echo chamber ▪ virus ▪ piracy	
STEP 2	Engage critically with the metaphor and challenge the worldview connected to it. Analyse the selected metaphor along with these questions: ▪ What does this metaphor entail? ▪ What is the source on which the metaphor is built on? ▪ What problems does the metaphor refer to? ▪ What connotations does the metaphor entail? ▪ What normalities and seemingly self-evident facts are conveyed? ▪ What does the metaphor hide? ▪ What fears, constraints and freedoms emanate from the metaphor?	
STEP 3	Reconstruct your metaphor by giving it a new meaning or applying a different concept: ▪ Can you reverse the meaning of the metaphor? ▪ What might be a new metaphor or different narrative? Based on your new metaphor, answer the following questions, moving the canvas from bottom to top: 1 How does this new metaphor affect worldviews? 2 How does the future imagined in your metaphor affect systemic causes? 3 Draft a problem or litany (e.g. in the form of a newspaper headline) based on that future image. 4 What possible implications and problems might arise from this alternative metaphor?	

STEP 4

Present your original and transformed metaphors and your litany to the group and collectively discuss your results. What are the underlying assumptions and worldviews, and how do your alternative metaphors shape our perception? What new realities might arise from your transformed metaphor?

GUIDING QUESTIONS

What worked well?

- What worked well?
- What is a new narrative or metaphor that would support your preferred future?
- Out of these alternative futures emerging from the new metaphors, which is your preferred one?
- What other metaphors can be imagined?
- How could the underlying worldviews of your new metaphors be supported by practice?
- Which strategies can be employed for you to realise the preferred future?

CONTINUE WITH OUR TOOLBOX

For a different take on digital futures, try the tool:
Newspaper from 2040.

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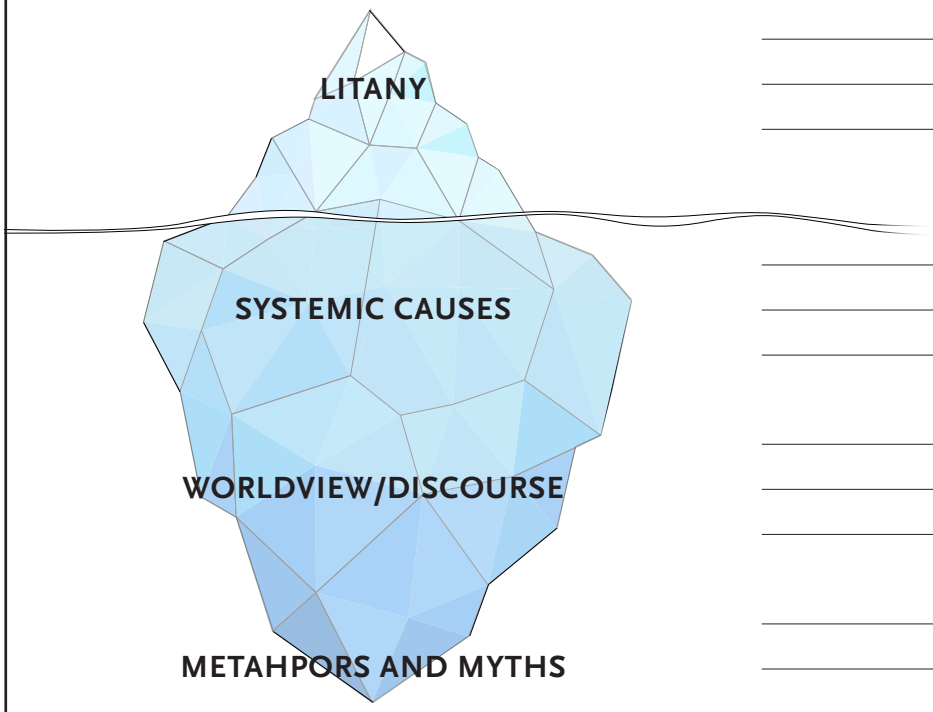
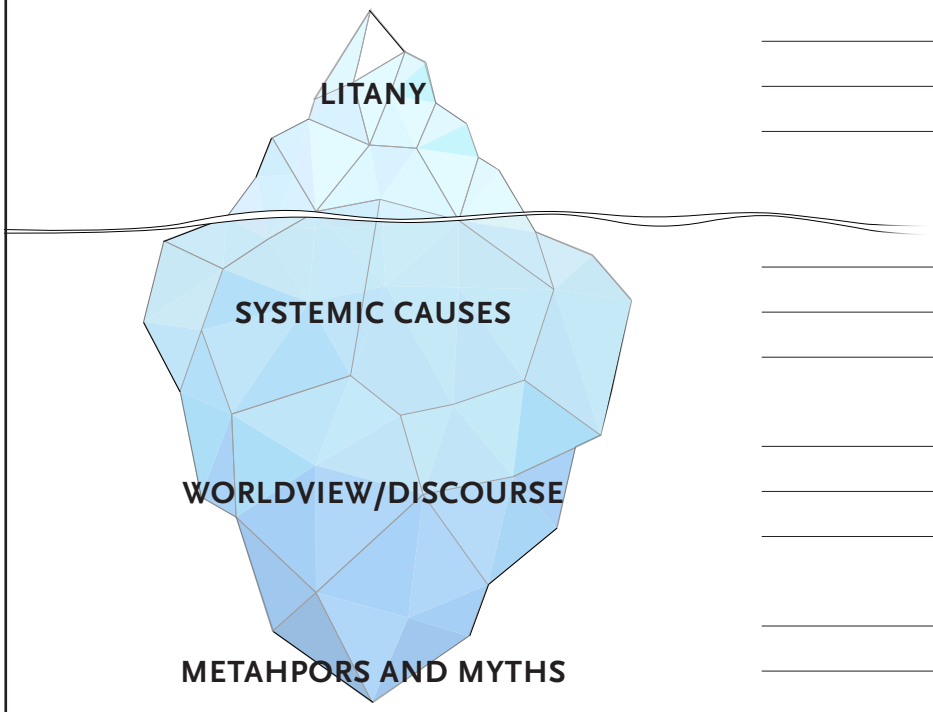


Printouts: Transform future language



Printouts: Transform future language