



## Essay

# “Words And Dreams”: Using Liminality for Empowerment

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## Abstract

*This essay presents « Words and Dreams », a field-based foresight intervention grounded in liminality theory to foster agency among vocational hospitality students in France. Drawing on Van Gennep's tripartite structure of rites of passage, the project leverages experiential futures and narrative reframing to disrupt inherited perceptions of self and profession. By embedding students in a high-level international event, the initiative operationalizes future-oriented empowerment through symbolic and material recognition. Although not derived from canonical foresight methodologies, the process aligns with the logic of anticipatory systems and 'prospective opérationnelle'. The project illustrates how designing the conditions for narrative emergence can catalyze identity transformation and futures literacy among structurally marginalized youth.*

## Keywords

Hospitality industry, Education, Youth Transition, Transformative Impact, Inclusive

## Introduction

The World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) held its XXV World Conference in Paris in October 2023 on the theme of the liminality. Although the authors are not futurists, we attended this event as change agents. With experience in the hotel and catering industry, our daily work involves assisting companies, schools, and institutions in adapting to future challenges. We also undertake change projects that we believe are essential to improving the conditions of people working in this field, on a voluntary basis. One project – 'Words and Dreams' – is discussed in this paper and aims to empower students to change the way they think about themselves, their futures, and their vision of the hospitality industry. The project was undertaken by the authors with students from the Lycée François Rabelais de Dugny (a hospitality high school) in France.

Change is about transforming state A into state B but does not happen instantaneously. A long liminal process is involved, especially when human nature is involved. We used Van Gennep's work (1977, p.21) which described clearly this liminal stage as a “rite of passage”: a liminal phase centered around an initiatory event, very formalized, clearly explained to all participants and implemented under the authority of a ‘master of the game’. We focused on Van Gennep's process to design the event to prepare for it (preliminal rite) and after the event to facilitate the recognition of the change (postliminal rite).

This essay presents our case study, from the background of the project (what problems it addresses and why) to the methodology (the goals and process of the experiment) to the results and their discussion.

It should be noted that because we do not work in the futures field, we claim no deep knowledge of futures methods, such as causal layered analysis, scenario development and the design of futures workshops. We have done a superficial literature review, but our aim here is to present our process and what we have learned from four years of running that process.

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## Situation and Challenges

This paper focus on the hospitality and catering sector (HCS) in France. Challenges in three interlocking sectors are discussed first: (i) the business sector; (ii) the vocational training sector; and (iii) the student sector.

### Business sector

From gastronomic and traditional restaurants to mass catering for schools, hospitals, companies, the HCS plays a vital role in France's economy. In 2020 this was a thriving industry, with 179,156 companies providing catering to a broad market (pre-tax sales: 52, 608.5 million euro), and was France's largest, providing full-time jobs for 487,839.7 individuals (INSEE, 2020).

However, the sector currently faces a significant challenge: recruitment. KPMG (2023) has reported that 83% of restaurant owners in France face serious difficulties in finding suitable candidates to staff their establishments, suggesting that not only is the situation for restaurants but also for the entire hotel and restaurant industry. During the COVID-19 pandemic, around 150,000 employees changed jobs in this sector, resulting in a net loss of a skilled workforce. In June 2022, approximately 200,000 positions were still unfilled (CESE, 2022).

The HCS is currently characterized by challenging working conditions: physically demanding work, irregular hours, and pay lower than the national average. Most employees face precarious employment conditions, with widespread use of fixed-term contracts and a high rate of part-time work (CESE, 2022). These unenviable professional situations lead to significant staff turnover, reflecting the ongoing challenges of recognition and valorization of labor in this sector.

### Vocational training

There are 419 specialized, public and private schools that train students, aged 15 to 25, for careers in the HCS (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse, 2024). These schools operate differently according to their status. Private institutions attract students from a national and international recruitment pool and tend to focus on the luxury HCS sector. Public schools have a local recruitment pool and provide a workforce for regions across France.

The challenge is that hospitality public schools, typically located in towns, offer a traditional education in hospitality and catering, preparing the sector's essential yet often undervalued workers. Often seen as a way out of school or career sidetracks, this is a less demanding educational option in terms of educational level and prerequisites.

### Students

Students who attend public hospitality schools encounter three issues (Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, 2022):

- interest in the field – most did not choose this training (Palheta, 2012) and instead were channeled into this stream because of poor results and chaotic study trajectories (academic constraint), and/or working-class backgrounds (social constraint), and/or gender and place of residence such as rural/urban contrasts (social determinants);
- culture: their socio-professional category (blue-workers, illegal migrants, unemployed) and so have no references, access or cultural insights related to this profession (Gervais, 2020); and
- motivation: two related phenomena affect a student's motivation – first, this training stream and their education suffer from negative representation rooted in French society. Second, significant number

of students were encouraged to pursue their studies in this industry after being rejected from more selective vocational training courses, which leads them to develop a negative perception of themselves (that is, school failure) (Depoilly, et al., 2023).

The following data supports the above statements:

- according to a 2017 survey conducted by the French Ministry of Labour (DARES, 2018), the hotel and catering industry has the highest dropout rate among apprentices;
- the proportion of higher education graduates in this sector is only half that of other industries; and
- only half of graduates continue working in the restaurant industry after three years (Forté, 2013).

This data indicates both an ill-perception of hospitality jobs in general, leading to students dropping out of study or after three years of work, and a low personal self-esteem that might be mirrored by teachers and employers.

### **Problems**

The above issues have far-reaching consequences for all stakeholders in the hospitality industry. For restaurants, it means:

- difficulties in recruiting qualified staff;
- economic risks – e.g. business closures and increased costs;
- strained client relationships due to reduced quality resulting from understaffing; and
- increased pressure and workload for staff.

For public and private hospitality high schools, it means a decline in enrollment in classes specialized in restaurant service, resulting in the closure of some classes.

For public school students, this situation has even deeper impacts, such as:

- lack of interest in the sector and a lack of knowledge about career opportunities;
- feeling that their time in school has been wasted; and
- a school drop-out that can also lead to a social drop-out.

The French HCS industry therefore faces significant recruitment challenges. The sector suffers from high attrition rates with far-reaching consequences, highlighting the critical need to shift public perception about the industry and the realities of forging a career within it. Tackling these issues is imperative for the future sustainability and growth of France's HCS sector, as well as for nurturing the potential of the youth in our regions.

However, these challenges cannot be confined to one economic sector: "Vulnerable demographics, particularly children and youth, face unique obstacles in exercising their human rights. These challenges hinder their social development and well-being, increasing their vulnerability" (Sharpe et al., 2024). If youth are to make informed decisions in the present to shape their futures, we cannot target only young people with a strong academic background, nurtured in a rich socio-cultural category, but also include vulnerable people who are usually excluded from the possibility of shaping their collective futures. We must then help people to think about their own future, before they can project themselves in collective futures thinking.

## Words and Dreams Project

Since our project is based in France, we first researched French futurists because we can read French research. We did not undertake an expansive literature review which is beyond the scope of this paper but are aware of many other well known and field founders in the field. We reference the work of Goux-Baudiment's (2008) here, from which we specified two cultural root causes, embedded in French society, of the situation for students discussed in previous sections:

- self-censorship because of a lack of self-confidence due to challenges the students face during their educational trajectory and when they evolve and try to find their true place in society; and
- a cultural perception of service jobs as menial instead of skilled trades, amplified by a limited awareness of the diverse range of HCS professions, affecting the way they shape their future prospects.

To test our assumptions, we explored whether a foresight experiment might lead to a transformational thinking change for students and verify our assumptions - the *Words and Dreams Project*. Our case study goal was to create the right conditions for positive change, in a way that could be transferable to other countries experiencing the same difficulties. This involved three factors:

- perception: deconstructing negative self-perceptions and empowering individuals to make intentional choices leading to concrete actions with positive results;
- ambition: providing opportunities for professional development to fuel ambition and empower students to take control of their future; and
- the vision: transforming the way people consider the HCS profession, shifting it from being ill regarded to being highly valued.

## Methodology

### Background

Again, we understand the scope of futures methods now, but at the time our method first emerged, we were working the HCS. We became aware over time of futures work in the hospitality industry (see for example: Hartman and Postma (2024), on strategic foresight and scenarios; Varum, et al., (2011) for a case study on futures implementation in the industry in Portugal; and Seyitoğlu & Costa, (2024) for a literature review of scenarios in tourism and hospitality research.) We believed that, while these types of research were interesting for us in our futures learning, there seemed to be a strong focus on scenarios for the industry which was not our approach here which we describe next.

We are a team of two professionals with a background and extensive knowledge in the hotel and catering industry. We also are dedicated to sustainable development and have extensive experience in assisting organizations to transition towards more sustainable practices. This has allowed us to gain a deep understanding of sustainability, and although we are not academic researchers but rather practice-based innovation researchers, the two cultural root causes we are using here emerged from this work. As a next step, we looked for an opportunity to design our experiment to ascertain if we could identify the right conditions for a positive change around sustainability in the HCS sector. The project methodology unfolded from two different perspectives: project management and change.

Pre-Event: three main steps supported development and design of the process:

- identify and persuade a public hospitality high school (including teachers and students of Years 11, 12 and 13) to participate in the project and manage this participation;

- organize a collaborative experiential process a hospitality related conference (ChangeNOW) and its stakeholders (event organizers, event agency, hospitality high school, the caterer) which had three steps: (i) students working as apprentices with the selected event caterer to ensure provision of all requisite services (breakfast, lunch, cocktail dinner); (ii) a collective intelligence process based on the ability of a group to think, solve problems, and innovate collaboratively by leveraging individual skills and knowledge, and (iii) which enabled a comprehensive framework (collaboration, benevolence) to be established for this experiential learning; and
- bring our skills to the project (project design, management and development), creating a foundation of trust between the professionals we hoped to involve in our project.

Change Process: three steps were needed to ensure change was achieved:

- preliminary conditions: preparing the project with the hospitality high school and the various stakeholders and motivating the students to participate;
- the liminal 'rite of passage': during the event where the students were confronted by a new learning environment, activity and experience; and
- The postliminal step: when the students were 'rewarded' with a letter of recommendation, an official picture, and posts on social networks.

### ***The opportunity for experimentation***

ChangeNOW is an annual, international event in Paris dedicated to finding and accelerating solutions for systemic change in the HCS sector. Its founders requested assistance for their event in January 2020, including the design and implementation of sustainable catering for visitors and for VIP events.

We proposed to go beyond their expected needs to incorporate our experiment to create some conditions at the event for a positive change in perception, ambition and vision of participating students. Within this framework, limited by circumstances and resources, our experiment had to focus on one precise issue. We chose to design a process to reshape the narrative related to the HCS as a transversal contribution to perception, ambition and vision.

Our assumption was that participation of students from a poorly considered sector in an international, prestigious summit would enable them to discover a new vision of HCS and to shape a new narrative for their own careers. The aim of Words and Dreams was to enable students to use this narrative and their contribution to the event to fuel their ambition and improve their individual perception of their curriculum and their future place in society. In turn, this empowerment would lead to a stronger motivation to explore the vast range of opportunities the catering sector offers.

While structured foresight methods were not used, our focus on narrative and transforming students' thinking about their futures ensured that our lens and discussions with students was always about their futures and finding new options in the present. We also used a liminality approach, increasingly relevant to futures work, as a theoretical input into our work.

### ***Methodological approach***

We sought to explore this question:

*how could we design a process to elaborate and use a narrative that generates the right conditions for positive change for students in the present, and for the future?*

Our approach was based on three factors or pillars: implicit narrative, the right conditions and achieving positive change. Our basic premise was that 'our sense of reality is increasingly structured by narrative' (Fulton, 2005, p.1). We recognized the need for a structuring and meaningful narrative in our process, powerful enough to induce a positive change in students' mindsets and orient them to their futures. But our quandary was how to build the narrative, considering that we are not foresight practitioners, and that most of the students involved are not comfortable with intellectual approaches?

We defined the 'narrative' as an intuitive sense-making process that could help the students "to understand what is hidden, unnoticed, unrecorded (...) in mainstream" culture (Squire et al., 2014, p.79), using not only "words, events and meanings, as it is usually thought, but (also) relationships, contexts, voices, images and metaphors, urban

and natural places, cultures, and ecologies” (Formenti et al., 2014).

We decided to implement the right conditions for a positive change in our project that would allow each student to create an implicit narrative with their own cultural references, delivering the following messages:

- this sector of activity, my hospitality high school and myself are important enough for a group of professional partners to have decided to implement this experiment – which changes my perception of myself and my educational environment;
- the working conditions that they have put in place for me show a significant effort to offer me as pleasant a professional experience as possible, and their support and benevolence have enabled me to succeed in this experiment – since I have been able to do it, I now have ambition for myself; and
- I now have a new perspective for the future in an industry that I ignored: catering for events.

We aimed to intuitively recreate the conditions of the ‘rite of passage’ mentioned earlier. Within this framework, ‘a right condition’ is defined as a set of positive circumstances that help develop a new narrative and make it easier to be enacted. We therefore sought to surface and convey an implicit narrative, aligned with our goal to change participants’ perception, ambition and vision about their futures.

### ***Process***

Our aim was for students to gain insights from HCS professionals through dialogues with them, and to realize that their potential for success in various careers is not limited by their background, social class, or place of residence. Social networks (such as LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube) were crucial for spreading the word about the project. Additionally, we organized meetings with the head of each student’s school to promote their participation in the event before (for preparation) and afterwards (for recognition).

We also provided consistent support during the conference via favorable working conditions and guidance at the conference. Students acted as apprentices for the event caterer in professional catering teams and were assigned significant responsibilities. They were given a specific schedule to encourage exchange and sharing of experiences which allowed students to gain valuable insight into the different positions they held. We also provided individual recognition through a personal letter of recommendation for their future employers and their school records after the event.

Finally, to help them expand their vision about their futures in this field, we promoted their work on site through symbolic items including a leaflet related to the project naming their respective hospitality high school, a reception with the co-founder of the event to thank them and emphasize the importance of their profession (with an official picture).

### **Results and Discussion**

We have focused on the creation of the right conditions that would induce the emergence of a new, positive narrative in the students’ mindsets, hoping that the combination of these conditions and the ensuing emerging narrative would trigger a positive change both ideal (narrative-based) and material (experience-based) for the students.

### ***Results***

#### ***Overview***

This project helped youth transition from negative self-perception to recognizing their ability to confront challenges and make decisions on their own. According to the qualitative data from (1) teachers’ and principal’s reporting, and (2) the compulsory survey for students, most who took part in this experimental process changed their mindset from having no ambition to being identified as a strong candidate for recruitment by a prestigious caterer. Systematic interviews with event partners led to a shifting of their negative perceptions of students to a positive one of passionate professionals who take pride in their work. In the final debrief, the founding organizer of the ChangeNOW event recognized and appreciated the value of the students’ services. As a result, we were invited to

participate in the event again in 2022 and 2023.

Our results are general in nature as explained in the Limitations section below.

### *2020 results*

The initial experiment in 2020 was deemed successful enough to warrant renewal by the event organizer. The outcomes here varied among stakeholders:

- ChangeNOW decided to incorporate the project into their Corporate Social Responsibility policy, ensuring its continuity;
- the hospitality high school acknowledged a threefold benefit: the chance to provide their students with exceptional professional experience; the spotlight on the often-overlooked profession of caterers; and external funding of a pedagogical project; and
- the students experienced a 'wahoo' moment during an international, high-level event at a prestigious Parisian venue (Grand Palais), and from survey results, their motivation was significantly boosted.

### *Three year-based results*

After three events (ChangeNOW 2020, 2022, 2023), we have gained a better understanding of the ongoing outcomes for students.

The results of the project are indicated by the following insights:

- renewal of the project for three years, excluding 2021, and preparation of the 2024 conference, highlighting the significance of the profession in the event industry and acknowledging the involvement of students, instilling a sense of legitimacy in their career;
- growing communication and awareness of the project, crucial to recognize students' ability to produce high-quality work, regardless of their geographical or social background; and
- increasing student members participating in the project from 98 in 2020 to 145 in 2023 and 249 for in 2024, highlighting its growing significance for them.

Among the qualitative impacts reported by students and stakeholders are:

- the annual event helps students who may have been considering quitting their academic stream to gain a better understanding of the opportunities available to them and to continue their studies;
- stakeholders gained a deeper understanding of the project and outcomes, and with the benefit of previous years' experience, their support has become increasingly positive towards students (internships, masterclasses); and
- students increased the project's value and reputation by promoting it to other students at their high school, while stakeholders communicated about the project via social media (includes LinkedIn, Instagram, websites).

### *Discussion*

Until the start of 2024, we have devoted our time to developing and managing this experiment. As it increases size and complexity, we now need to analyze it more deeply, particularly to evaluate it.

### *Diving deeper*

The project has multiple dimensions interacting synergistically, producing effects that we are only beginning to discover. For example, as students are seldom given the opportunity to voice their thoughts in discussions that affect them, we tested the idea in 2023 to create video capsules for social networks, derived from responses to our questionnaire. Four teachers and eight students were selected, proudly sharing their visions and aspirations.

We also successfully integrated a group of nine students into the Elocution Competition which took place during ChangeNOW 2024. Until now, such competitions would only target more privileged cohorts, both culturally and academically.

### *Limits of the project*

Lack of knowledge of the futures/foresight field. Now that we are more fully aware of the field, we should be able to integrate this research into our design of the Words and Dreams process.

Insufficient resources. Financial limitations for human resources and professional video equipment hinder the project. We are committed to resolving this issue in 2025, as the impact of this project on the youth is now demonstrated.

Beyond the project, an alumni community. An alumni follow-up of participants is necessary, to both maintain connections between students who have had shared experiences but also to create a sense of community and belonging. This would reinforce the transformative power of the program and break the cycle of loneliness often experienced by students with difficult backgrounds.

Need for evaluation. Students complete an evaluation questionnaire each cycle, as well as surveys, interviews and debriefings with stakeholders. Results are purely qualitative. We need to learn how to conduct a scientific and long-term evaluation of our project, which is not part of our practitioner background. With more detail and quantitative results, the impact of Words and Dream should be easier to demonstrate through detailed impacts for students.

For this reason, we have been unable to collate, categorise, interpret and provide quotes from the individual student cohorts over time in this paper. This will be included in our process as soon as possible to demonstrate the depth of change and the emotional shifts that occurred that the students and stakeholders have reported over the years. Here we can only report that we have seen and felt this shift in views on the hospitality industry, and how the students might bridge the liminal gap between the present and their new possible futures in that industry.

### **Conclusion**

While this work may is not a formal foresight project, results demonstrate the transformative impact achieved. This has led us to position our project as a form of 'operational foresight', as defined by Simon Nora (Cazes, 1986): "Foresight is about reorganizing the present to prepare for the future", a way to think the future elaborated by the founder of the French 'prospective', Gaston Berger (Cournand et al., 1973).

Because it addresses two fundamental human needs (empowerment and capacity building), is based on two universal pillars (the capacity to shape our futures), and offers the ability to transform their identity or status (liminality of a rite of passage), it is possible that this experiment has the potential to be replicated worldwide.

By giving students the opportunity not only to take part in ChangeNOW and contribute to its success, we have created effective conditions for their empowerment process to unfold and to embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery and growth. They experienced liminality, appreciating who they are and transforming themselves to envision a brighter future. This process has triggered positive emotions and energy, playing a significant role in their decision-making about their near future. Consequently, we hope they will be more inclined to make choices that bring about positive change, contributing to the development of a thriving society.

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