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Considering Possible Futures

Utopian and dystopian narratives reflecting the present

The realisation of the „grandest sociotechnical imaginary of our time" (Beck et al. 2021, 143) – sustainability – depends on the imagination and creation of a future radically different from the present. In order to achieve that, "the" future first needs to be opened up: options now presented as unavoidable and their realisation "only a matter of time" need to be problematised and scrutinised. Next, imaginative work is vital to help create alternative visions of what's possible. Here, using utopian or dystopian narratives to fuel exploratory thinking can lead students to critically examine the present and lead them to imagine alternative (un)desirable futures.

Futures literacy, imagination, utopias, dystopias

Topic: Exploring possible futures

WHAT is it about? WHO is it about?

The dominant imaginaries of the future are often presented as fixed and linear, only waiting to be realised (Death 2022). However, the changes advocated by scientists to move towards sustainability require a radically different way of doing things (Mukherji et al. 2023), thus pointing to the need to open up the future to alternatives. Sadly, many education systems still follow a paradigm rooted in industrialist, linear, and reductionist thinking (Courtney & Mann 2021; Sterling & Orr 2001), making them badly equipped to address the sustainability issues before us today. As the belief that education can serve as an important driver towards giving rise to a more sustainable future from the unsustainable present is widespread among academics and policy makers alike (Andersson 2017; Bianchi et al. 2022; Sterling & Orr 2001; Wiek & Redman 2022).Therefore, preparing futures literate teachers, who can imagine and work to fulfil alternative ways of learning and teaching, is an important step towards sustainability. Futures literacy includes situating teachers in their spatiotemporal context, building the capacity to view the future as a variety of alternatives open for creation and exploring how the present can give rise to desirable futures (Karlsen 2021). Or, as Miller (2018) succinctly puts it, futures literacy is "the capability to 'use-the-future'" (2). Creating the shift to a more sustainable future also requires imagining alternative futures radically different to

the present – for example, to challenge *capitalist realism* as depicted by (Fisher 2009). Here, utopian and dystopian narratives can provide a way for students to engage in exploratory thinking (Bianchi et al. 2022) to expand ways of imagining possible futures (Bina et al. 2020). Thus, this learning scenario imagines engaging with various short stories about utopian or dystopian realities to first provide inspiration for imagining alternative futures and second, to provide context for (re)assessing the present. The stories can also be used to think about concrete ways of reaching/avoiding the depicted scenarios.

Didactics

This learning scenario provides prospective teachers with the time and space to explore and think about utopian and dystopian alternatives to the present and future. Such an approach makes use of active learning methods by asking students to undertake their own imaginative journeys and allows for prospective teachers to construct their own understanding of the task. The learning scenario also focuses on group work and discussion, creating a non-hierarchical, collaborative learning environment vital for moving towards sustainability. It also makes use of the flipped classroom model. However, the suggested texts can accommodate analysis from any field, so the learning scenario is highly adaptable to other contexts.

WHO is the target group? WHO are possible cooperation partners?

The learning scenario at hand is targeted to prospective teachers/teacher students of higher education institutions, or anyone interested in the possibility of exploring the future(s) of learning and teaching. The materials for the learning scenario can also be customised to explore the utopian and dystopian possibilities of/for other fields. The sample list of narratives provided vary considerably in length, so that accommodations can be made for time constraints. However, students should nonetheless have competences to engage with long(er) form literary texts.

WHY is this topic relevant to *CultureNature Literacy*? WHERE is it going?

Envisioning sustainable futures makes up an important set of competences in *GreenComp* (Bianchi et al. 2022), where "learners are advised to think of a wide range of possible future outcomes and envision alternative future scenarios for sustainability" (*ibid.,* 23). In this task, Futures Literacy skills (CNL & Futures Literacy) are a vital component. The learning scenario at hand turns the focus to prospective teachers' capability of imagining alternative, (un)desirable futures. In the process of such imaginative work, it might serve to bring to prospective teachers' attention the various literary and fictional stories they can use to ground and fuel their imaginaries.

WHEN, in which period does this take place?

The learning scenario is designed to take place over a period of one or two 90-minute seminars in any university course. While the focus is currently using utopian and dystopian narratives to analyse the possible futures and present of learning and teaching, the proposed narratives can serve as a source of discussion for alternatives of any field.

HOW to proceed?

Step 1: Divide (teacher) students into groups and provide each of them with one short story presented below. Students in one group should be given the same story. Instruct them to individually read the story before the (next) seminar.

Step 2: Organise the groups by the stories they've previously read. Ask each group to determine the key pillars/characteristics of the utopian or dystopian society they read. If the learning scenario is adopted for use in a more literary-focused setting/course, students might be asked to delve deeper into text work. For such an occasion, the teacher can provide guiding questions, such as *What ways lead into the depicted future? What are the pillars/characteristics of the (un)desirable society? Which of these characteristics can be paralleled with phenomena of our time?*

Based on that, have them imagine what an education system in such a society would look like. What does learning look like? What is the role of the teacher? Are there curricula? If so, what is the content of the curriculum? If not, what (if anything) directs learning? What does assessment look like?

In the group, students create an as-detailed-as-possible vision of how teaching would be organised. Here, they can and should also use various digital or physical aids to create a compelling imaginary.

This step can be completed in smaller groups; thus it might be preferable to provide students with the option of organising their own meeting time and place (an online discussion might be preferred by some groups).

Step 3: Next, groups present their imaginaries to the whole group. This requires a whole group meeting, so an online or in-person collaborative area is required.

Step 4: After every group has presented their work, have groups swap their materials. Now, each group attempts to analyse how another group's vision of a utopian or dystopian education system could potentially apply to our present. Ask some guiding questions: Is this a likely or an unlikely scenario? What needs to happen for such an education system to apply to our reality? Is this an improvement to the current situation or not? How does what was presented reflect our education system – what is similar, what is different?

Step 5 (optional): Have students attempt to deduce the main pillars/characteristic utopian or dystopian society from the education system as it was depicted by the group that presented their work in Step 3. Their deductions can then be compared to the short story that served as inspiration for imaginative work or shared with the group that created the original imaginary.

WHAT is being worked with?

Study materials include various utopian and dystopian short stories. A sample list can be found here (emphasis has been put to provide stories from authors from various backgrounds):

- *The Machine Stops,* E. M. Forster (1909)
- *There Will Come Soft Rains,* Ray Bradbury (1950)
- *Harrison Bergeron,* Kurt Vonnegut (1961)
- *Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,* Ursula K. Le Guin (1973)
- *Amaryllis*, Carrie Vaughn (2010)
- *Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™,* Rebecca Roanhorse (2017)
- *The Ones Who Stay and Fight*, N.K. Jemisin (2020)

WHERE does the learning scenario take place?

Step 1 of the learning scenario can be completed by the students either at home or in class. Step 2 requires a small group discussion and, as such, should be conducted by the students either face-to-face or online. It might be preferable for the students to choose the location according to their own needs. Steps 3 and 4 require a big group discussion, but this can also be held either online or face-to-face.

Literature

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Quality criteria | SDGs

Sustainability: Learning to see the future as uncertain and probabilistic forms the basis for imagining and creating sustainable futures.

Inclusion: Recognising the uncertainty and possible alternatives of/for the future permits and encourages including alternative viewpoints and visions of desirable futures into the prevalent discourse. Focusing on adding alternative viewpoints of desirability in the creation of possible futures encourages a policy of inclusion. Students should be provided with necessary support to read the texts proposed in the learning scenario (e.g. read together in smaller steps, work with audio-books, images etc.).

Digitality: It is possible to conduct the learning scenario fully online, thus providing the option of including different and distant voices to the conversation. Additionally, the learning scenario makes it possible to reflect on the various aspects of (un)desirablity of digitality.

Target group correspondence: The target group for the learning scenario is first and foremost prospective teachers who are encouraged to explore alternative visions of the future. The workshop can be customised to appeal to any field.

SDG: SDG 4, but as all of the SDGs require imagining and creating a future different from the present, the competence addressed by the learning scenario is best characterised as a meta-goal to help in realisation of the more concrete SDGs.

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