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Creating Multiple Futures

Scenario planning for exploring alternative futures

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 helping create alternative visions of what’s possible and increasing our adaptability. Here, scenario planning can help to draw attention to how the future might unfold in various ways. In this learning scenario, learners are asked to create a variety of scenarios to explore the openness of futures.

Futures literacy, imagination, scenario planning

Topic: Creating possible futures

WHAT is it about? WHO is it about?

The prominent imaginaries of the future by dominant powers 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), 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 concretely 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, scenario planning is a useful tool for developing the capacity to see the future as open and subject to change (Miller 2007). Scenario planning involves imagining and possibly depicting alternative outlines of the future (Amer et al. 2013), thus clearly presenting the future as open and subject to change.

Didactics

This learning scenario provides prospective teachers with the time and space to explore and create several alternative scenarios for the future. Such an approach makes use of active learning methods and allows 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.

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 of the learning scenario can also be customised to explore the alternative futures of/for other fields the students are familiar with.

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 to tackle the challenges currently facing humanity in the Anthropocene. The learning scenario at hand turns the focus to prospective teachers’ capability of imagining alternative futures, thus recognising future as open and malleable. Such an approach also builds prospective teachers’ agency to imagine and the create alternative, sustainable futures, while increasing teacher’s adaptability.

WHEN, in which period does this take place?

The learning scenario is designed to take in a 90-minute seminar in any university course. While the focus is currently on creating differing scenarios in the field of education, the learning scenario is easily adaptable for other contexts.

HOW to proceed?

Step 1: Explain the concept of scenario planning and its purpose. (If necessary, [this infographic](#) can provide a learner-friendly summary of scenario planning.) Emphasise that the future is uncertain and that by exploring different scenarios, learners can develop a better understanding of potential futures and increase their adaptability to various scenarios.

Step 2: Divide learners into small groups of about 3 to 5 students. Bigger groups are also an option, depending on how many people are participating. Provide each group with a specific topic or theme relevant to the course, e.g. our school, technology, environmental sustainability, or culture. The topic or theme should be broad enough to warrant differing scenario creation.

Instruct them to brainstorm and create three or four distinct scenarios that represent possible futures related to the given topic. Encourage them to consider scenarios that appear optimistic and pessimistic to them. Explain that the scenarios should be descriptive, detailing key events, trends, and potential consequences of each scenario.

Step 3: Next, groups present their scenarios to the whole group. This requires a whole group meeting, so an online or in-person collaborative area is required. Allocate time for each group to present their scenarios while the whole group can provide feedback or build on the scenarios.

Step 4: After every small group has presented their work, facilitate a group discussion focusing on the implications of the presented scenarios. Encourage learners to consider the potential impact on different stakeholders, identify opportunities and challenges, and discuss strategies for adapting or shaping those futures.

Step 5 (optional): Facilitate a reflection exercise where students compare and contrast the different scenarios presented. Encourage them to identify commonalities, emerging trends, and uncertainties across scenarios. Guide them in exploring the limitations of scenario planning and highlight the open and unknowable nature of the future.

WHAT is being worked with?

No materials are necessary, learners are encouraged to create their own visions of alternative futures. To support facilitators, an overview and one possibility of conducting a scenario planning exercise, can be found in Miesing & Van Ness (2007).

WHERE does the learning scenario take place?

Step 1 of the learning scenario needs to be introduced in a big group discussion either online 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. Step 5 (if applicable) can be completed by students at their own pace.

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.

Digitality: It is possible to conduct the learning scenario fully online, thus providing the option of including different and distant voices to the conversation.

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, however.

SDG: SDG4, 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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