Your Future is not Enough

- A critical look at 'envisioning' and 'backcasting' in Education for Sustainable Development

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1. Introduction

Sustainability education as well as information in the media around sustainability issues tend to be based on alarmist and dystopic discourse. However, this could lead to a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. Maria Ojala (2012) discusses the importance of hope for environmental engagement among young people and distinguishes between two kinds of hope. On one hand, hope that is based on denial of climate change, unsurprisingly, negatively correlated with pro-environmental behavior. However, the other, 'constructive hope' had a significant positive influence on pro-environmental behavior. There were different sources for building this constructive hope, including positive re-appraisal (i.e., to activate positive emotions to deal with worry constructively), trust in other actors, and the belief that laypeople together can make a difference. Furthermore, Ojala (2017) specifically suggests how envisioning 'desirable' futures, and then transforming these into 'possible' futures through critical discussions could help towards building students' hope in an Education for Sustainable Development context, in a learning setting that has interpersonal trust.

This project started in line with this motivation, specifically around exploring the possibilities of envisioning futures in sustainability education. This involved a pedagogical development in the undergraduate course "Global Challenges and Sustainable Futures" (7,5 credits) at the Centre for Environment and Development Studies (CEMUS), a joint centre between Uppsala University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). The aim of this pedagogical project was to develop the final assignment, which asked students to imagine different future scenarios for a region or city of their choice, critically reflect in class on their initial visions and rework them according to the reflections. In our funding application, we had outlined our ambition to write a research article based on the student assignments that were submitted from the course in 2017. At the time of writing (April 2021), this has still not realized itself, as one of the project members Thomas left the position at Uppsala University after this project finished. Although Sachiko also

no longer works for the course "Global Challenges and Sustainable Futures" as a Course Coordinator, she continues to be involved as a course examiner (2018-present) and joins the course to facilitate the workshop dealing with the futures thinking project. Sachiko still intends to write a research article based on these pedagogical activities in the future, but as a side project alongside her full-time PhD studies, that may take a few more years.

In the remainder of this report, we will outline the main aspects of this assignment and pedagogical activities that took place in the class, and finish with our evaluation of both these pedagogical tools and the pedagogical development process. Ultimately, we hope our pedagogical work and our reflections could contribute to a wider development of using 'futures thinking' methods in Education for Sustainable Development.

2. The course "Global Challenges and Sustainable Futures"

The course is a free-standing course at the basic level in the undergraduate studies (no specific entry requirements for the course). It runs as an evening course (17.15-20.00), which brings opportunities for working (and older) students to join as well. The course is quite popular each year, with around 50-60 registered students, and in the year 2017, there were around 40 active students. More than half to around two-thirds of the class consists of international students from diverse countries, with the rest being Swedish students. The level of the studies also varied, with some students taking this course right after graduation of gymnasium (senior high school) to a few students taking this course as an elective course during their master's studies. Some students had a strong background in sustainability studies already, while for some students this course was the first opportunity to engage in these matters.

The course syllabus outlines four intended learning outcomes. "On completion of the course, the student should be able to:

1) from a multidisciplinary perspective account for the present sustainability challenge in a global context;
2) account for different causes to and possible solutions to the sustainability challenge in a specific city or region, and be able to relate these to global challenges within the sustainability field;
3) reflect and critically relate to his/her own role relating to the causes and solutions of the sustainability challenge;
4) evaluate and relate to different visions and ideas about what a sustainable future could entail."

The pedagogical project was related the learning goals 1), 2), and 4).

3. Back from the FutureS We Want

Since 2015, a vital part of the course has been the project related to futures thinking (called "Back from the FutureS We Want" in 2017). The main idea was for students to develop their own ideas on what 'sustainable futures' could include, and discuss how society can reach them, based on

'envisioning' and 'backcasting' activities. Sachiko had documented and published the pedagogical activities and outcomes in a book chapter (Ishihara & Marcos Valls 2017). In the previous years, it had been difficult to balance creative/innovative thinking with critical thinking. We wanted to develop an additional depth in learning for the students by reflecting stronger on power structures and inequalities in their ideas about the future.

The pedagogical activities started in the second half of the course by each student choosing a region or city that they feel connected to. After identifying important stakeholders and challenges for sustainability for this region, each student was asked to develop different visions of how the region could look 'sustainable' in year 2067, according to their ideas (The year 2067 was selected to synchronize with a film we watched in a seminar called *Carnage: Swallowing the Past* (2017, directed by Simon Amstell) which is a comedy "mocumentary" (a mock documentary) that portrays UK in 2067 that had become completely vegan). Different groups of students got different "what if" statements to constrain their futures (e.g. "What would your region look like in 2067, if there were open borders?"). During a workshop in class, students reflected on each other's visions and deconstruct their underlying power structures: Whose vision is it? For whom is this vision desirable, for whom not? Taking the reflections and discussions from this workshop into account, the students were asked to rework their visions. In the last part of the assignment, they are asked to come up with change processes that could lead to these visions in the next fifty years, identifying these processes with concrete actors. Finally, in small groups, the students collectively presented their outcome of their discussions in a creative way.

Here is a summary of how we changed the pedagogical activities in 2017, and our reflections on the changes.
- We changed this assignment **from a group project into a more Individual project**, with the group as a platform to share the process, and present the final outcome as a group. We reflected that this was perhaps a good way for them to care more about the project, since they were able to choose a region to work on that was close to their hearts.
- We focused much more on the **critical redevelopment of the visions**, introducing some exercises to reflect about your own **privilege** and think about whose visions (which social groups) are represented and envisioned in your futures. For example, we did an exercise in class called a 'privilege circle,' which asks students to stand in a circle, and have them take a step into the circle if the statements (which signify different elements of privilege or oppression) the facilitator reads out applies to them. We introduced shortly about privilege and social groups in a presentation and had them do a short role play going into underprivileged roles and imagining living in their pair's vision. Furthermore, we developed a tool called the '5 lenses' for the students to reflect on whether their vision was techno-optimistic, depended on the exploitation of other parts of the world, was a surveillance state etc. The intention was for the visions to get more complex and nuanced throughout the process. The tool, 5 lenses, has been shared with other colleagues at CEMUS, and has gotten feedback that it is a useful tool that can be applied to many different pedagogical moments.

5 Lenses

- **PEOPLE & PRIVILEGE:** Which social groups (age, gender, race/ethnicity, class) might be privileged? Who gains at economic, social and other levels? Who is silenced – what social groups are not included?
- **TECHNOLOGY:** What assumptions about technology are underlying? Is sustainability in this vision relying (too much) on technology? Are there any risks or vulnerabilities?
- **GLOBAL JUSTICE:** Does your seed rely on the exploitation of people and resources in other parts of the world? Where might resources be coming from? How might your region be relating to other parts of the world?
- **STATUS QUO OR CHANGE?:** How does this vision challenge the status quo or not (in terms of social norms, economic and political system)? Is this an evolution or a revolution?
- **POWER:** Who are the main actors for change? Who makes (political) decisions in your vision? Who controls whether people live "sustainably" and follow these political decisions? Is the political/organizational process surrounding your case democratic and transparent?

- For the final presentation of the whole project, we asked the students to **choose their presentation format in their groups**, naming this session as **'Final Performance'**. We were impressed by the variety of methods they chose to share: videos (two groups), a poem, a mingle session, a song, a podcast, a interactive 'voting' of motions, and a PR presentation of their regions. This was perhaps also the fact that they have been exposed to many facilitation methods through the course, and have also experienced running sessions themselves through another assignment called the Student-led Sessions. In that assignment, the same groups were asked to design and facilitate 45 minutes of a class to organize the discussions related to the session theme. We believe The Student-led Sessions helped them to think about activities in a different way, as something that they can imagine running, also since they always give feedback to their peers after each session. The course was overall a friendly atmosphere with a strong community feeling in that year, with many attending social activities, despite it being only a course that runs once a week.

4. The following years and communication of outcomes

Overall, the students get very engaged in the assignment and the class activities. In 2018, drawing on the reflections from this TUFF-funded project, Sachiko together with the new Course Coordinator colleague changed the assignment into a new direction, using another framework called Seeds, inspired by a research project Seeds of a Good Anthropocene (https://goodanthropocenes.net). Sachiko has presented at the University's pedagogical conference in 2019 how she has used this framework both at CEMUS and at her newly affiliated department. You can also find the video recording of the presentation through the link:

Ishihara, Sachiko. 2019. *Back(casting) to the Future We Want: Workshop in Community Planning Education.* Konferens i universitetspedagogisk utveckling, 12 oktober, 2019, Uppsala, Sweden. Available at: http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1381685&dswid=-7498

Furthermore, Sachiko has facilitated a workshop together with colleagues drawing on this experience at the online Degrowth conference in 2020. Our reflections from the outcomes of this workshop is now published online in a peer-reviewed journal:

Fitzpatrick, Nick, Chris Vrettos, Alejandro Manero Ruz, Laila Mendy, Aaron Tuckey, and Sachiko Ishihara. In Press. "Sowing the Seeds of Degrowth Futures: Reporting Back from Degrowth Vienna 2020." *Journal of Futures Studies*. Available at: https://jfsdigital.org/sowing-the-seeds-of-degrowth-futures-reporting-back-from-degrowth-vienna-2020/

As mentioned earlier, using futures thinking tools have continued in the course to present, even after Sachiko and Thomas have formally left the role as Course Coordinators. The pedagogical activities that we have developed here has been taken even to different contexts. As mentioned above, Sachiko has brought them to the Department of Social and Economic Geography and to conferences and sharing the pedagogical tools with other colleagues has brought the activities to Campus Gotland too. Although this report is belated in its submission, we find it also positive to be able to report back how this project has grown over the years, even after the project funding had formally finished.

References

Ishihara, Sachiko, and Alejandro Marcos Valls. 2017. "Back from the Future We Want: Backcasting as a Pedagogical Practice towards Sustainable Futures." In *Envisioning Futures for Environmental and Sustainability Education*, edited by Peter Blaze Corcoran, Joseph P. Weakland, and Arjen E.J. Wals, 333–44. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers. https://doi.org/10.3920/978-90-8686-846-9.

Ojala, Maria. 2017. "Hope and Anticipation in Education for a Sustainable Future." *Futures* 94: 76–84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2016.10.004.

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