

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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Cindy Kohtala [cindy.kohtala@welho.com]

Lecturer, School of Design, University of Art & Design Helsinki, Finland

DESIGN-ORIENTED FUTURES WHEELS

Using Foresight Methodologies in Our Design Schools

Abstract

This paper proposes a simple workshop model for design students based on futures and foresight methods. The aim of the workshop is to both familiarize design students with certain futures methodologies in general, and thereby systems thinking, as well as to direct their attention to the long-term impact of their activities. It is therefore plausible to see this workshop as operating in a BA or MA programme as project or course introductory material, and/or as forming part of a curriculum module under the theme of systems thinking, impact assessment, design ethics, or similar. The workshop platform is basic, flexible, and discussion-based and can thus be adapted to local needs and themes.

The workshop focuses on the use of the Futures Wheel and Causal Layer Analysis methodologies. The former method is especially simple and easy to understand and implement, but leading the activity does require some experience or careful facilitation as it may easily result in “intellectual spaghetti” (Glenn 2003, p. 10). It is a brainstorming approach, but a structured and systematic one. The latter method, Causal Layered Analysis, is far more detailed and analytical. For these reasons, the workshop template developed for this paper suggests a set of design-relevant questions and structure proposals. The goal is that with this simple set of instructions and leading questions, any lecturer anywhere can conduct Design Futures Wheel and Design CLA exercises with only paper and pen.

The Futures Wheel

The Futures Wheel was developed in 1971 by Jerome C. Glenn as a method to identify and organize the primary, secondary and tertiary consequences of events in order to create a mental map of the future (Glenn 2003, pp. 3-4). It is related to mind-mapping, but more clearly sets out the various levels of impacts as they occur in time and is thus useful in further forecasting and scenario work. In Glenn's own words, the “Futures Wheel also helps move the mind from linear, hierarchical, and simplistic thinking to more network-oriented, organic, and complex thinking” (Glenn 2003, p. 9).

A Design Futures Wheel focuses on one specific design proposal, trend, event, technological development or similar, which is defined verbally and placed in an oval at the centre of the wheel. The consequences of this event are then discussed with the help of the facilitator's guiding, design-relevant questions, and placed around the centre radially as they occur in time. Students thereby gain experience in environmental scanning and analysis with a view to impact assessment.

Causal Layered Analysis

CLA is used here as a second futures method for adaptation because a Design CLA directly addresses the myths, assumptions and social discourses that surround design and technology advancement. This

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can allow for deeper scenario work subsequently, as well as a deeper discussion on transition management, path dependence, and barriers and leverage points: in other words, how change can actually be effected. The latter capacity makes CLA comparable to for example Jungk's Future Workshops (see Bell 1997, pp. 300-5).

CLA was developed by Sohail Inayatullah in the early 1990s in order to focus on the vertical layers of discourse that may not be revealed by the more horizontal spatiality of foresight methods such as backcasting. These layers include myths and metaphors (the often emotive, archetypical, or unconscious dimensions of the problem or issue) and the "litany" (the surface, 'knee-jerk' reactions to an issue that may render a person helpless or fearful) (see Inayatullah). As with the Futures Wheel, the facilitator of a Design CLA uses a set of design-oriented questions in a discussion-based, environmental-scanning exercise. This activity serves to expose how issues and problems are framed in society, and how this framing limits true understanding (see Scenarios for Sustainability). Like the Futures Wheel, a Design CLA encourages discussion on values and visions in the quest to define preferable future(s).

This paper is a preliminary study in preparation for future doctoral studies for the author. The workshop template is thus currently in the process of being tested, with the aim of reporting results and improvements at the final conference presentation.

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