How can we move students from critically analysing contemporary challenges – for example urban inequality and unsustainability – to also imagining possible responses to them? In this chapter, which draws on my book *Creative Universities: Reimagining Education for Global Challenges and Alternative Futures* (Schwittay, 2021), I show how introducing students to design thinking and methods, including scenario building, is an active learning approach that combines critique and creativity in university classrooms. While design methods can be applied in any course that deals with social, economic or ecological challenges, the activity described here is based on a series of exercises I undertake with students in a third-year specialist module on Urban Futures and is informed by my long-term collaboration with design-educator Paul Braund (Braund & Schwittay, 2006).

I also draw on Anne-Marie Willis’ exercise ‘Designing back from the future,’ where she defines scenarios as projections of likely futures that open them up for reflection, including on the actions necessary to achieve them (Willis, 2014). I use positive and pro-active scenarios that ask students to imagine preferred futures and to pose ‘how might we’ and ‘what if’ questions to make ideas concrete. Willis argues that scenarios need to be set in a specific place and long-enough time horizon and be based on in-depth research to stop them from being fantasies or wishful thinking. Ideally students undertake this research prior to the scenario
building activity, but if that is not possible, even giving them basic information and laptop access to conduct on-the-spot research can help provide the necessary realistic context.

The activity works well with student groups of around 5 or 6 members each; if there are more than 5 such groups, several facilitators would ensure that all groups get the necessary attention. This chapter is structured around five suggested steps for how to plan and implement scenario building exercises in class: providing clear structures and inspiring materials, starting with what is familiar to students, asking questions, ensuring that students move from writing to building and debriefing.

1) Provide structure and materials

Even though this might seem counter-intuitive, it is important to give students clear guidelines and structured activity outlines for more open-ended learning activities such as scenario building (Lyon, 2011). From my own experience, students are often not familiar with creative classroom work, can be resistant to it because of ‘I can’t draw’-type reservations, might feel vulnerable outside of their comfort zones or prefer passive knowledge accumulation to exploratory learning (James & Brookfield, 2014). Explaining the objectives of creative classroom activities and how they work, in clear and empathetic ways, puts students at ease and helps to ensure effective learning. In addition, having a room with movable tables and chairs and providing easy-to-manipulate working materials, such as pipe cleaners, Play-Doh, building blocks or natural materials, enhance a sense of playfulness that can alleviate anxieties, engage the senses and allow creativity to flow more freely.

When I have carried out this activity with students, their excitement upon entering a well-prepared room was always palpable, with students often starting to play with the materials they found on the tables, twisting pipe cleaners into whimsical shapes.
and commenting how the smell of Play-Doh often brought back childhood memories. An inviting set-up therefore shows students that they are allowed and expected to engage in active and creative learning.

2) Start with what students know

Making room for students’ own experiential knowledge introduces additional perspectives, decentres classroom authority and gives student a sense of ownership in their learning. In universities with an urban campus, this could engage the surrounding city (in the case of Sussex University, it’s Brighton where most students live after their first year). Otherwise, if the group collectively decides on a location, recommend that they pick a place that at least one group member knows well. Finding creative ways to bring in students' experiences can help to get them ready for the activity – in my class students keep a personal Brighton diary for a week where they chronicle their journeys, activities and interactions prior to the scenario building activity. I also challenge students to move away from writing, by producing maps, taking pictures, building artefacts, recording short videos or spoken word pieces. These diary exercises resonate with students who often comment how they come much more aware of their lives in Brighton and can see their experiences as active learning opportunities.

3) Pose questions to guide students’ visioning process

The actual scenario exercise starts with students articulating their preferred future scenarios. If the activity is of sufficient length – I suggest at least 3 hours – and students have enough background
knowledge, they can collectively negotiate their own vision, in the process learning that there are often more than one idea of what constitutes a preferred future. Guiding questions are important to facilitate that visioning process, such as:

- What do we want future urban spaces in [Brighton] to look like?
- How might we get there?
- What new structures, laws, behaviours, institutions etc would we need to create?
- Who will participate in the process and who might be excluded or negatively impacted?

If the activity is shorter, a pre-defined scenario can get students going faster; in my class I suggest the vision of 'Brighton in 2050 will be a self-sustaining, hospitable and generous city.' These visions are jumping off points from which students work back to the present and imagine what would need to happen to achieve them.

4) Make sure students build

Sometimes students get stuck on writing, which is how they usually express their thoughts at university, so it might be necessary to remind them throughout the activity that they are expected to draw and to build. It is a good idea for the educator/facilitator to visit each group and to be prepared to get stuck in – without taking over, which can be challenging. Having materials available on each table, together with photos and visual prompts, also helps to reinforce the expectation that students will produce a built scenario at the end of the activity (Halse, 2013). I always explain to students that the process is just as, or even more, important than the final product. Such prompts can also help when students get stuck on details or find it difficult ‘to make things up.’
5) Make time for sharing and debriefing

Sharing their creations gives students an opportunity to explain their work and take pride in it. Collective debriefs are important to draw out the learning from the activity.

I have conducted this teaching activity several times in different contexts and received much valuable student feedback, which focused not only on this being a more memorable and joyful way of learning together with their peers, but, in addition, students ‘learned about a new way to think (not just words),’ which speaks directly to the active learning component of this activity. Similarly, comments such as ‘I realised that there are a hundred ways to work’ show how students are opening up their perceptions of what learning entails and how it can be enacted in the classroom.

References


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Professor Anke Schwittay has been teaching for 15+ years in International Development and Anthropology at universities in the US, New Zealand and UK. This teaching journey has nurtured her interest in creative teaching, which led to the recent publication of a book called Creative Universities: Reimagining Education for Global Challenges and Alternative Futures.