

Preferred Futures 2020: Are Students Interested in Sustainable Futures?

David Hicks

Bath College of
Higher Education
UK



One of the worst signs of our danger is that we can't imagine the route from here to utopia. Take the first step and you're there. Process, dynamism, the way is the life. We must imagine the way. Our imagination is always stronger than theirs. Take the first step and you're on the road.

—Kim Stanley Robinson 1992

The debate about the need for and nature of a more sustainable society is one of the most important taking place today. It requires detailed elaboration of a future that does not yet exist but must surely be brought into being (Marien 1994). One of the benchmark descriptions of what a more sustainable future might involve was that set out in *Caring for the Earth* (IUCN 1992). Amongst the key principles identified by the authors were:

- respect and care for the community of life
- improve the quality of human life
- conserve the Earth's vitality and diversity
- minimise the depletion of non-renewable resources
- keep within the Earth's carrying capacity
- change personal attitudes and practice
- enable communities to care for their own environments

What these and other principles might look like in practice in different contexts has been explored by various writers such as Brown et al. (1991), Milbrath (1989), Trainer (1995), Whitelegg (1993) and others. Such specialist descriptions, however, still lie in the hands of the experts and are read only by the interested or converted, rather than by members of the general public. This raises the question of how sustainability is understood by lay people, if at all.

That members of the public have some difficulty with the notion of sustainability was reported by McNaghten et al. (1995) in a study commissioned by Lancashire County

A B S T R A C T

This article begins by comparing public awareness and interest in sustainability with the views of experts in this field. Attention is then drawn to the need for people to be able to imagine their preferable futures before they can begin to work towards them. Futures workshops are cited as a means to this end and a pilot study is described which used this procedure to enable participants to identify the key elements of their desired futures. A preliminary assessment is made of the effectiveness of such a process and the saliency of sustainability in these images of preferred futures.

Council. This study found that people were generally unfamiliar with the idea of sustainability, although once they understood it they identified positively with it. However, it was also noted that because people displayed a high level of cynicism towards local and national government they may have ignored official pronouncements about sustainability which came from such bodies.

In my own work with students I have found that undergraduates have been quick to pick up the rhetoric associated with the need for a more sustainable future. However they have found it much more difficult to visualise what this might look like in practice. To try and rectify this we have taken a group of students each year to stay at the Centre for Alternative Technology in mid-Wales (Hicks & Bord 1994). At the Centre which receives some 90,000 visitors per year residential groups can study the use of renewable energy resources and a conserver lifestyle at first hand. Student responses have varied from surprise, curiosity and excitement to shock and disbelief.

In his paper 'The sustainable society: What we know about what people think and do' Worcester (1994) reported on a variety of public opinion surveys which detailed people's attitudes towards the environment. He argued that in Britain people's attitudes and values seemed to be changing in the face of growing information about the need for a more sustainable society. One should note however, that whilst these opinion surveys certainly have charted changing interest in environmental issues they have seldom phrased their enquiries in terms of sustainability per se.

Worcester also reported a series of wider 'life-style trends' observable over the last twenty years which lent support to Inglehart's (1990) thesis concerning the shift towards a post-materialist society and Milbrath's (1989) argument that there is a clash in the western world between the *Dominant Social Paradigm* and a *New Environmental*

Paradigm. This has been a useful reminder for environmentalists that public acceptance of sustainability may need to be looked for in the context of broader socio-political changes.

Futures workshops

I have described elsewhere the value of futures studies to educators and environmental educators (Hicks 1994 & 1996, Hicks & Holden 1995a, 1995b) and, in particular, the role that futures workshops can play in clarifying images of preferred futures. As Meadows et al. (1992) commented:

A sustainable world can never come into being if it cannot be envisioned. The vision must be built up from the contributions of many people before it is complete and compelling.

Futures workshops provide a valuable context within which participants can begin to develop and explore just such visions.

Ziegler (1991) described working with urban planners, business executives, health workers and others, using a process of envisioning which had five stages: discerning participants' concerns, individual imaging of preferred futures, creating a shared vision, connecting the future with the present, and identifying strategy paths and action. More detailed accounts of the procedures used in such workshops can be found in Jungk and Mullert (1987) and Ziegler (1989). Much less has been written however on the outcomes of such workshops. One of the most interesting reports is by Boulding (1988) who detailed the futures imagery which arose when she worked with such groups.

Boulding's interest in envisioning grew out of her work with peace groups in the early 1980s. The problem she found was that whilst such groups were quite clear about what sort of society they opposed, that is one based on militarism and nuclear weapons, they found it much more difficult to visualise the alternative society they wanted instead. They knew what they were against but were less clear about what they were for. She therefore worked with Ziegler to develop a workshop process particularly aimed at envisioning a world without weapons (Boulding 1991). Such workshops work best over a whole day or a weekend; time constraints have often made it necessary to compress them into a shorter period.

Boulding (1988) described her work with three groups containing some three hundred people; each group participated in a three-hour workshop designed to help participants visualise a future world without weapons. The three groups were: young people concerned about issues of peace, intellectuals and activists committed to making war obsolete and a mixed group interested in the changing roles of men. The central activity involved participants in a guided visualisation followed by the creation in small groups of posters which conveyed in written and pictorial

form their preferred futures. Boulding analysed the results by listing all the images that appeared on the posters and then clustering these into key themes. They were then ranked by frequency of appearance for each of the three groups. Her overall key themes are listed in Table 1.

Table 1—Key themes arising in Boulding's futures workshops

- a lack of divisions based on age, race or gender
- a non-hierarchical world with no one 'in charge'
- a strong sense of place and community
- low-profile and widely shared technology, particularly relating to communications and transport
- people acting out of a more peaceable 'new consciousness'
- education taking place 'on the job'
- food grown locally
- a 'bright, clean, green' world, particularly amongst young people
- a sense of the local community as joyful, nurturing and celebratory
- a 'boundaryless' world unimpeded by social, occupational or political barriers

Boulding reported that the first seven themes regularly arose in the groups she worked with. The themes made up what she called the "baseline future". The last three themes did not always occur, but were nevertheless very common.

The pilot study described here used Boulding's (1994) workshop procedure to investigate: whether it was effective in helping participants generate images of their preferred futures, the range of images that arose, and participants' responses to the processes used. Workshops were run with groups of students studying at three institutions of higher education in the south-west of England. Just over half of the ninety students involved were training to be teachers (BEd or Post Graduate Certificate in Education). Just under half had made some study of contemporary global issues (BA/BSc Combined Awards).

Each of the three 3-hour workshops was introduced as an opportunity for participants to clarify their preferred world in 2020. The first activity involved drawing local/global timelines, both probable and preferable, for the period 1995-2020. This enabled students to identify their own present concerns and goals for the future. The second activity required use of the creative imagination, using Boulding's (1994) guided visualisation, to identify particular features of their preferred futures. Resulting images were then shared and participants worked in pairs to prepare a joint poster summarising the main elements of this future. A total of forty two posters were available for analysis.

What did students want?

Each poster was analysed to ascertain the main images contained in it. All the images were listed and then clustered by focus resulting in identification of twelve key themes overall. The features of each are summarised, but not ranked, in Table 2.

Table 2: Preferable futures—twelve key themes

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|---|
| Green —clean air and water, trees, wildlife, flowers |
| Convivial —co-operative, relaxed, happy, caring, laughter |
| Peaceful —lack of violent conflict, security, global harmony |
| Just —equal rights of people/planet, no discrimination |
| Healthy —better health care, alternative, longer life |
| Community —local, small, friendly, simpler, sense of community |
| Equity —no poverty, fair shares for all, no hunger |
| Transport —no cars, no pollution, public transport, bikes |
| Education —for all, on-going for life, holistic, community |
| Energy —lower consumption, renewable and clean sources |
| Food —organic farming, locally grown, balanced diet |
| Work —for all, satisfying, shared, shorter hours |

The number of mentions received by each theme was then recorded so that a rank order could be arrived at. This is shown in Table 3, together with the overall percentage of students mentioning that theme in their preferable future.

Table 3: Preferable futures—key themes in rank order

| | | |
|----|-----------|-----|
| 1 | Green | 79% |
| 2 | Convivial | 74% |
| 3 | Transport | 55% |
| 4 | Peaceful | 53% |
| 5 | Equality | 38% |
| 6 | Community | 36% |
| 7 | Justice | 36% |
| 8 | Education | 30% |
| 9 | Energy | 26% |
| 10 | Work | 23% |
| 11 | Health | 19% |
| 12 | Food | 15% |

Whilst this form of analysis is a little crude it nevertheless clearly highlights the concerns of these students and shows the relative importance of different issues for them. First

and foremost over three-quarters of the participants wanted a future in which the natural environment would be respected, protected and revered.

They wanted it to be, using Boulding's description, "bright, clean, green". Frequent reference was made to clean air, land and water, richness and diversity of species, together with an abundance of trees and flowers. Balancing this prime concern for the planet was a concern for human interaction and quality of life, particularly with respect to a sense of conviviality, social well-being and celebratory interconnectedness with others.

The third quality that just over half of the participants wanted to see in their preferred futures was a more peaceful world. This was expressed both in terms of the local community and the world as a whole. In a sense this was an extension to the wider community both within and between nations of the conviviality they wanted to experience in their own lives. The most important issue mentioned by just over half of the participants was that of transport. A strong preference was expressed for a society in which cars were not used or at least in which there were fewer cars. Great emphasis was placed on the need for good, cheap and efficient transport particularly trams and cycles.

The baseline future for this group of students was therefore green, convivial and peaceful, with a stress on alternative forms of transport. Three other important features were mentioned by just over a third of participants. There was a concern that this society of the future should embody much greater economic equity than today, with no rich or poor, homes for all, fair trading between countries, no hunger and no exploitation of Third World countries. Closely allied to this was a wish for justice, an atmosphere of tolerance and harmony, an absence of discrimination, a respect for human rights and indeed rights for all species. Also important was the sense of belonging to a community, and the feeling that small and local was beautiful, whether in respect to agriculture or industry.

Given that many of the students were training to be teachers it is interesting that education was mentioned by less than a third of them. Not a lot was said about what this would look like in their preferred future. It would certainly be available to all and lifelong. It would be public rather than private, creative, holistic, perhaps at home. The remaining four features all relate to particular issues. A quarter mentioned the need for alternative sources of clean and renewable energy such as solar, water and wind power. Just under a quarter referred to work being different in the future, available to all who wanted it, as well as being safe and satisfying. Just under a fifth wanted a healthier future in which health care was freely available to all, and which paid more attention to alternative approaches. Finally, a small percentage made reference to food or farming in their preferred futures. The stress was on organic farming, locally grown foodstuffs, a balanced diet and food for all.

Whilst one should be wary of generalising from this pilot

study it nevertheless adds to the knowledge that we have about the value of futures workshops. Of Boulding's ten common themes shown in Table 1, seven can be observed in the futures described here. These relate to: a lack of discrimination, a sense of place/community, food grown locally, technology in relation to transport, peaceable, green and celebratory. This is an interesting overlap given the differences between Boulding's participants and those in this study. It goes some way to support her contention that there may be a "baseline future" which seems to emerge from such envisioning. However, much more work needs to be done monitoring the outcomes of such workshops before any clear conclusions can be drawn.

Boulding's workshop process, even when condensed to three hours, appeared to be effective in helping participants generate clearer images of their preferred futures. This study also gives some indication of the range of images that may occur. In the evaluation students were asked to indicate on a five-point scale: the extent to which they found the workshop process easy to work with, whether it helped them think more clearly about the future, whether it helped them clarify their vision for the future and whether it helped them clarify appropriate action for the future. As Table 4 shows participants considered the workshop process to be highly effective in promoting thinking and envisioning but less effective in clarify relevant action for the future.

Table 4: Student evaluation of workshop effectiveness

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|---------------------------|-----|
| Workshop process | 88% |
| Thinking about the future | 84% |
| Visions of the future | 77% |
| Action for the future | 50% |

Participants were also asked what they enjoyed most about the workshop. This was generally the guided visualisation and the opportunity to share with others the details of their own preferred futures. In particular, they were impressed by the fact that they often shared the same hopes and fears. Just under a quarter reported that they found the visualisation difficult. Whilst in some cases this may have been because they sensed or intuited rather than 'saw' images, it was probably because visualisation is underused and undervalued in formal education. These results indicate that guided visualisation can be very effective for clarifying the key elements of preferred futures.

Conclusions

Are students interested in sustainability? Only a handful of participants actually referred to sustainability on their posters which is not surprising given the findings of the study referred to earlier (McNaghten et al. 1995). However, it is quite clear that some notion of sustainability was implicitly present in the preferred futures that they described. It was a little elusive and understated but

nevertheless present as an underlying theme. Several of the principles of sustainability set out at the beginning of this article were present, at least tacitly, in these preferred futures. They drew attention to other aspects of society which need to change if humans are to create a better global future. They also reflected many of the features of Milbrath's (1989) *New Environmental Paradigm*. Thus, whilst sustainability was still most often described in ecological terms a truly sustainable society was one which embodied economic equity, justice and peace.

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David Hicks is Reader in Futures Education at Bath College of Higher Education, Bath, UK. He is on the Editorial Board of the journal *Environmental Education Research* and is particularly interested in combining the concerns of futures studies and environmental education.
