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## Narrating future(s) with others: teaching strategic sustainability management in a relational key

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### Keywords

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future narratives;  
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sustainability.

### Abstract

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A substantial part of sustainability management education is teaching students how to deal with increasingly uncertain futures. Increasingly, academics concerned with sustainability challenges claim that a sustainable way of being with the world needs a transformational shift in how humans relate to one another and the natural world. This paper takes this as a starting point to show the potentials of a relational approach to future scenario planning for developing an ecopedagogy of strategic sustainability management education. For this, it describes a course design that uses narratives to sensitise students to the contingent and composed nature of reality and enable them to take part in negotiating and shaping current and future realities together with others. The paper then highlights the importance of aesthetics for developing transformational capacities. It closes with a reflection on the limits of relational course designs in cultural settings dominated by individuality, nature/culture divide and anthropocentrism.

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## Introduction

The widening and worrisome gap between increasing sustainability efforts and ongoing environmental degradation (Dyllick & Muff, 2016) makes apparently clear that current approaches to management are far from meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations, thereby securing 'our common future'. This definition of sustainable development introduced in the so-called Brundtland report (1987) clarifies that sustainability concerns are as much about the future as they are of the present. Sustainability management mirrors this in a rapid shift from being perceived as an operational task to a strategic matter (Borland et al., 2016) that demands dealing with uncertain futures, new social, political and economic environments and the need to respond to them adequately. Management education has incorporated teaching sustainability as a strategic management matter by engaging practices like forecasting or future scenario planning.

Conventional education, however, is predominantly rooted in an anthropocentric, individualist, and rationalist worldview and relies on a subject/object divide. Critical scholars have widely attacked this kind of management education for its predominant focus on reductive thinking, abstract principles, and practices of control (Colombo, 2022; Fleming et al., 2021; Parker, 2018; Izak et al., 2017). In the current situation, however, even management and organisation educators who do not necessarily identify with the critical school start to question the philosophical underpinning of current management education (Hoffmann, 2021).

On the one hand, this implies rethinking conventional education for sustainable development. Instead of considering education as "merely a method for delivering and propagating experts' ideas about sustainable development", critical educators start developing approaches to foster "participatory and metacognitive engagement with students over what (if anything) sustainable development even means." (Kahn, 2008, p. 7). Such an approach seems to do justice to the open and increasingly uncertain future that comes with climate change, biodiversity loss and ongoing land degradation. At the same time, it also resonates with Paulo Freire's work of critical pedagogy that aims at social justice, liberation and humanisation to counter conventional education and its assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world. Moacir Gadotti (2000) took this as a starting point for integrating an ecological ethics to develop what today is known as ecopedagogy. Ecopedagogy is not a coherent set of theories or practices but rather serves on a meta-level to reflect on the education of sustainable development, which is promising with regard to further developing sustainable management education (Kahn, 2008).

On the other hand, next to making ethics the centre of education (Abdelgaffar, 2021), an important part of rethinking management education for sustainable futures is rebalancing its onto-epistemological underpinnings (Lange, 2018). To tackle the challenges of the Anthropocene, it needs "transformational change at the systemic level that [among others] re-considers how humans relate to the natural world"

(Ergene et al. 2021, p. 1321). To go beyond integrating environmental concerns into the well-known theoretical frames of corporate strategy, teaching sustainability as a strategic matter would thus necessitate a shift from a realist to a relational ontology (Ergene et al., 2021).

This paper contributes to this emerging field of developing an ecopedagogy of sustainability management in a world with others. It does so by taking on a relational lens for engaging with future scenario planning and showing how students learn to approach sustainable futures as a matter of contingent connections between a vast diversity of human and nonhuman actors. While this implies that strategising might mean becoming aware of, relying on, and forging such connections, I argue that developing an aesthetic sense is an important competence for fostering organisational sustainability transformation.

In the following, I give an overview of how future scenarios are used in strategic management education and specifically with regard to how they are considered for teaching sustainability to show how this is deeply rooted in an ontology that assumes that "a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others" (Freire, 1970, cited in Korsant, 2022, p. 3). I then introduce an outline of a course that is part of an executive master programme called Strategic Sustainability Management that aims at teaching strategy in a relational key and discuss the role of aesthetics and storytelling in developing a sense for taking part in shaping (sustainable) futures with others. I conclude by reflecting on the limits of relational approaches to future scenario planning for an ecopedagogy of strategic sustainability management education.

## Future scenarios in strategic sustainability education

Management practices are historically rooted in the assumption of relatively stable socio-ecological environments whose futures are an extrapolation of the present (or even the past). Based on the ideals of Enlightenment, such as rationality, foresight and planning, this "institutionalised a hierarchical worldview that celebrated the controllability of nature, the transcendence of environmental limits, and the human capacity to (one day) predict the future" (Rickards et al., 2014, p. 589). Hence, for a long time, the future seemed manageable and controllable by humans, but environmental degradation makes this assumption less of a taken-for-granted matter.

This new level of uncertainty has stirred discussions about the necessity for "new analytical and pedagogical approaches [that] must be developed" (Ferraro et al., 2015, p. 381) to "avoid the reproduction of easy, familiar solutions which may themselves contribute to prolonging and intensifying such challenges" (Mailhot & Lachapelle, 2022, p. 2). Part of this has been a turn towards scenario planning as strategic means to deal with "[t]he new organisational action context – complex, radically uncertain and even 'wicked' (difficult or impossible to remedy)" (Mailhot & Lachapelle, 2022, p. 4).

Unlike forecasting, future scenario planning “entails generating ‘a story about how the future might turn out’” (O’Brian, 2004, p. 709, cited in Wade & Piccinini, 2020, p. 700) and is thus less involved with predicting the future (Tsoukas & Shepherd, 2004) but with extending mental models and cognitive frames to prepare for change beyond the expected. Future scenario planning is thus considered to be designed to distort expectations that the future will be similar to the present or the past.

Future scenario planning originating in military planning has been adopted by the corporate sector, with Dutch Royal Shell being said to be one of the first in 1965. Lately, it has been explicitly made part of curricula of sustainability management to prepare management students for working in an increasingly dynamic market environment, for dealing with increasing environmental turbulence (Wade & Piccinini, 2020) and potentially “to benefit from changing conditions” (Hillmann et al., 2018, p. 461). Traditionally part of risk management, future scenario planning is now related to organisational resilience (Hillmann et al., 2018) and adaptability to changes in socio-ecological environments. Future scenarios, however, can also be part of a less passive approach. Flyverbom and Garsten (2021, p. 5) argue, “the future is not there to be observed and reported on at a distance but is produced and perceived from a particular point of view with priorities and interests”. Being part of “anticipatory governance” (Boyd et al., 2015), this turns the future from something that exists outside of organisational practices into something that is made through anticipatory activities that “serve to gauge and guide organisational processes along different temporal orientations” (Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021, p. 2).

While the future might not be an extrapolation of the past, these views on future scenario planning are invested in the notion of control. They are involved with an ontology that considers the environment a separate entity that assumes a hierarchical relationship with the organisation. In this hierarchical relationship, the environment (and subsequently the future as a time-related form of an organisation’s environment) is characterised either as a force to which an organisation has to adapt, respond, prepare or a domain to be shaped, influenced and controlled through organisational actors (Miller, 2019). Such approaches to uncertain futures retain legitimacy through their paradigmatic orientation towards dominant management onto-epistemology, “which separates humanity from nature and truth from morality” (Gladwin et al., 1995, p. 874, in Ergene et al., 2021, p. 1325).

To leave unsustainable trajectories that, at best, promote less unsustainability, however, relationality has come to the attention of sustainability educators (Lange, 2018). Being far from a coherent theoretical approach, relationality is an emerging paradigm appearing as a plethora of approaches in ontology, epistemology and ethics (Walsh et al., 2021) whose potential for sustainability research and teaching is still to be fully explored. This, I argue, holds true especially for management studies, where the resource-based view on nature still proliferates (Ergene et al., 2018). With this article, I contribute to this nascent field. Arguing that making future scenarios fruitful for sustainability strategy needs a concept of possible futures that functions in a different key, I bring

together future scenario planning with a relational lens to reconceptualise strategic sustainability management education.

For this, I outline in the following the course design of a module that is part of an executive master programme aimed at enabling students to initiate and accompany the sustainability transformation of their organisations, be it a company, a not-for-profit organisation or a municipality.

## **Future storytelling in the strategic sustainability management curriculum**

Strategic sustainability management (SNM) is conceptualised as a 3+1 term study program co-taught by academics and practitioners to support students to become change agents who initiate, facilitate and accompany organisational change processes towards sustainable development.

The course described in this publication is situated in the first year. It is taught over six full days, distributed evenly over three blocks and accompanied by online meetings during self-study phases. Its pedagogical objectives are the following: 1) developing a sense of contingency and thus openness to the future; 2) realising that formulating (desirable) future states is a crucial part of sustainability strategy; 3) learning how to use storytelling for engaging speculative knowledge about possible futures. These objectives are embedded in a relational paradigm that sees strategy not as a method capable of shaping the future single-handedly but rather as a way of taking part in and contributing to bringing about reality together with others. The course starts with introducing discourse as a strategic means to participate and position oneself in debates about what sustainability means and what it implies. Students are given statements of different positions in the sustainability discourse that can be distinguished with regard to the relationship to nature, ideas regarding the natural state of society (equality or inequality), and the role of technology in shaping (sustainable) futures. They are asked to specifically focus on how the argument is crafted, what kinds of metaphors are used and what kinds of links are drawn between the different elements. This opens up the often unquestioned notion of sustainability and makes it visible as a matter of concern that is diverse, composed in a particular way and constantly negotiated.

In a second step, students shift from analysis to crafting narratives through a storytelling game, called the “Game of Global Futures”, developed by Anna Tsing and Elizabeth Pollman (2005). The game asks participants to develop a narrative involving a “secret mission,” such as “create a revolution with a coalition with at least two unlikely allies” involving actors that come in the form of image cards that, showing for instance, Mickey Mouse, sweetcorn, Albert Einstein, rockets or a whale, all of which have to be interpreted. Opening up their imagination for the “possibilities of contingent connections” and these connections’ “power to shape the future” (Tsing & Pollman, 2005, p. 107), students test in a rather playful way how to compose plausible stories about the future and gain a sense for connections between human and nonhuman actors that can shape the future.

At the end of the first block, students are introduced to the coffee sector as a field pervaded with sustainability issues that will lead to profound changes in the upcoming years and unsettle current business models and practices. Introducing the course's aim of developing a (desirable) scenario for the sector in 2050 and the final assessment of presenting this scenario in front of everyone, the students enter their first self-led research phase about the complex entanglements of the coffee sector in groups along the value chain. They also carry out and share further research about more general trends and drivers that might affect the development of the coffee sector.

In the second block, students are introduced to qualitative future scenario methods based on key-factor analysis and the approach used in the course identified as normative narrative scenario development that usually contains five steps: determining the scenario field, determining key impact factors, analysing key impact factors, generating scenarios, and transferring scenarios, in this case, through backcasting.

First, students are asked to reflect and discuss their research with regard to determining their scenario field within a focus on production, packaging/distribution or consumption and determining factors that could impact their field. Discussions are often vivid about what to include and exclude from view.

Next, they identify and select high-impact factors using the method of Cross-Impact-Analysis (CIA). CIA is based on the assumption that events are not singular but develop through their interrelations with others. While today, CIA has developed in various directions, with big data, statistical analysis and computer simulation being one of the major approaches, CIA started as a card game based on expert judgments (Gordon & Becker, 1972). Central to CIA, however, is identifying factors and events to explore their relational dynamics and their effects on probability. Similar to the "Game of Global Futures", students are made aware of the compositional agency that interrelated factors or events gain through their entanglements for shaping the future. At the end of the day, they are asked to share their analysis with the other students, who can add, comment or discuss the outcomes of each group. On the second day, students choose a limited amount of factors they have analysed as relevant or interesting in their CIA and sketch three different future scenarios for the coffee sector. They are introduced to the PESTEL framework, that is, political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal factors to be considered in developing rich future scenarios. At the end of the day, each group decides which raw scenarios are the most interesting to follow.

In their next self-learning phase, students further develop the raw scenario and enrich it with more knowledge by moving to the backcasting step of future scenario planning that links their scenario to present-day conditions. Asking, "if this future was our present, what would have happened?", students are also invited to think about the position of the company in this scenario (whether it still exists or not), its activities, decisions and links to other actors and events.

This is accompanied by an online lecture on story-telling and its role in co-shaping futures. It introduces students to future narratives as a strategic means for shaping expectations, setting up what is considered the realm of possibility for decision-making, and allocating resources, thereby contributing to making this future more probable. The centre of this introduction are the notions of plausibility and consistency as quality criteria for narratives and, even more so, for future narratives. This, once again, draws students' attention to connections between elements not only about how present and future realities are co-created through contingent connections (such as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the contingent connections between the virus + bats + agro-industrial practices + humans + international flights) but also with regard to narratives gaining convincing powers through crafting compelling connections between the elements of the narrative.

One student group, for instance, chose the following contingent elements: Climate disasters + countryside + traditional farming techniques + cooperative + feminism + World Women's Climate Summit + crowd investment + legislative changes + barter system + hyperinflation + reforestation projects. They interwove them into a compelling story about how female cooperatives producing coffee in Brazil emerged from heat and flooding disasters in urban environments and abandoned coffee farms to revitalise this land with the help of traditional knowledge and funding from women of the global North interested in sustainable investments. As the time horizon of the scenario was set to 2050, the story also included a period of hyperinflation in Brazil that led to a system of economic exchange that relied (partly) on barter and that demanded that international coffee roasting companies support local reforestation projects run by these cooperatives as part of their recreational efforts.

In a last online-feedback session, student groups briefly present their future narratives and check with the other groups and the teachers their plausibility. They also think about a convincing form of performing their future scenario narrative to everyone in the third block, using different characters, situations or formats.

The third block is dedicated to presenting the scenarios and their ethical reflection. Each group performs their scenario in about 20 minutes; for instance, as a commemorative speech at a future anniversary of a company or a documentary of the future or by future scientists reporting about the past 50 years up to the present of the (future) scenario. At the end of the day, all scenarios are reflected and discussed with regard to their transformational depth (how different is the painted scenario from our present reality?) and their level of plausibility (how convincing was the narrative?).

The last day of the course revolves around ethical reflections. Students use a sustainability model of their choice to ask about their scenario's relationship to nature, ideas regarding the natural state of society (equality or inequality), and the role of technology. This opens up their scenarios for ethical analysis in that it situates the position that they have given the company in their future scenario within



broader environmental and societal concerns and facilitates the question for whom the presented future narrative is desirable.

In the next section, I reflect on different aspects of the course outline, specifically focusing on the aesthetic dimension of engaging with sustainable futures and its potential for forming transformative capacities. I conclude by sketching the limits of transformational learning experiences.

### **Aesthetic attunement: Teaching sustainable futures in a relational key**

Teaching future scenario planning to students is rather challenging as it requires students to “bring together their knowledge of sustainability issues and the interactions of internal and external environmental factors to determine potential consequences of change in an organisation” (Wade & Piccinini, 2020, p. 702). The authors argue that to be able to effectively interpret, navigate and manage overcomplex, ambiguous and evolving knowledges, it needs creativity. Creativity can be elicited and harnessed by engaging our capacity for telling stories, thereby highlighting a capacity that not only everybody draws upon in everyday life but also foregrounding that it is meaningful connections that make futures possible. As a creative compositional craft that allows us “to consider different ways of seeing and being in the world” (Tan, 2022, p. 156), storytelling has been discussed as making the rather abstract notion of sustainability more accessible, transferring traditional knowledge, and promoting system thinking (Hofman-Bergholm, 2022). It can thus be engaged for a narrative politics that forges unexpected and contingent connections between human and nonhuman events, actions, and occurrences that have the potential to contribute to preferable futures and sustainable development by redirecting organisational resources and efforts (Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021).

Developing future scenarios emphasising that the future is made through connections between human and nonhuman matters, events, and existences also allows developing a critical stance towards management without leading to a sense of powerlessness (Mailhot & Lachapelle, 2022). Its relational ontology counters the hierarchical relationship between organisation and environment, between human and nature that prevails in most management education, including future scenario planning with its tendency to either prepare for dealing with the erratic force of the environment or to control it, thereby shaping the future (singlehandedly). Instead, students learn that the future is not something that is made alone but that they take part in making it with other human and nonhuman actors. To become sensitive to (contingent) connections that shape futures and how to position one’s organisation in relation to it means learning how to take part in an emergent future. Such learning of taking part is a form of compositional agency that fits the vague feeling many students starting the above-introduced executive programme express: that everything is connected. Here, agency is not a matter of autonomy but of connections. It is this sense of (contingent) connections and their possible composition that allows for thinking sustainability strategy in a new key that has been described as relational, critical

and political/engaged (Ergene et al., 2021).

Developing a sense for composition is an aesthetic matter and thus can be considered part of a positive politics of experimentation and wonder beyond the negativity of critique that “may instil a sense of powerlessness in students” (Mailhot & Lachapelle 2022, p. 8). Although the relationship between aesthetics and politics is often met with suspicion, aesthetics as part of sustainability politics that configures the realm of what is possible in that politics (Yusoff, 2010) slowly start to attract the attention of sustainability researchers (Braun, 2015). Here I argue that aesthetics is key to developing transformational capacities. If the necessary sustainability transformation is supposed to be successful, the ways we organise our existence on this planet do not resemble the past or the present. This implies that formal knowledge is helpful only to a limited extent. Next to conveying a systemic understanding of the present, teaching sustainability also needs to offer methods of dealing with not-knowing in a productive way. Developing a sense of composition is, thus, not only helpful for training students to craft plausible or coherent stories. It also allows them to explore futures that are not necessarily an extrapolation of the past or present, thus necessitating intellectual capacities beyond rational or explicit knowledge. Such unknown futures need to be felt, and it is an aesthetic richness that enables students to tap into their implicit, sentient and collective wisdom they embody (Strauß, 2019). Next to the rich narratives that they develop from their scenarios, performing these scenarios mediates the future through multi-sensual experience. It thus opens up the possibility for an empathic understanding – not knowing – of it.

Mediating a preferable future aesthetically does not only allow an empathic understanding of this possible future. It also might contribute to bridging what researchers working on sustainability transformation call the knowledge-action gap. This phenomenon describes inaction despite comprehensive knowledge of the situation and the need to change. “Stories,” as Maria Hoffman-Bergholm (2022, p. 7) states, “are in themselves emotional, social experiences” and links it to transformative learning “as a process through which we change the frames of reference we take for granted (meaning perspective, sensory habits, ways of thinking) and make them more inclusive, open, emotional, capable of changing, and reflective, so that they can generate beliefs and opinions that will give more true or motivated actions” (Hoffman-Bergholm, 2022, p. 7). Feeling out a preferable future instead of registering it rationally, therefore, affords affectivities that have the potential to bridge the gap to action.

### **Conclusion**

For management education to contribute to strong sustainability beyond merely reducing unsustainable (business) practices, it needs to be rooted in a relational paradigm. Relationality, in turn, requires an ontological, epistemological and ethical transformation (Lange, 2018). Doing so, however, is a rather challenging and time-consuming process, especially for students who grew up in Western individualistic cultures.

This paper argues for sustainability management education to become strongly sustainable, strategy and the way it deals with the future(s) has to be reconceptualised in a relational key. The above-described course design stresses this and uses a narrative approach to future scenario planning to sensitise students to the contingent and compositional nature of reality that makes the future an open and political matter that cannot be shaped single-handedly but in which one takes part in composing with others. Crafting narratives about sustainable futures and participating in negotiating these futures with others are aesthetics matters, so aesthetics becomes crucial in developing transformative capacities in a positive sustainability politics that emphasises experimentation and imagination.

Teaching such practice of positive politics, however, needs a different pedagogy than conventional education approaches. Instead of making sustainability an exclusive subject of expert knowledge to be delivered, asking students to develop narratives of sustainable futures and to reflect on for whom this future is actually desirable aims at transformational learning experiences that are at the core of ecopedagogical approaches (Michel, 2020). Yet, transformational learning experiences are difficult and demanding as they are usually involved not only with changes in perspective but changes in identity (Tan, 2022; Hoffman-Bergholm, 2022).

Hence, many narratives of sustainable futures developed in the course still have humans as main protagonists and show that students' sense of relationality is far from the deep existential feeling of belonging to a web of life that, for instance, indigenous philosophies are rooted in (Muller et al., 2019). Yet, as the example narrative shows, students become increasingly aware that narratives of sustainable futures need to contain connections with actors from the global South while they acknowledge nature and other nonhuman actors in their agential power through a framing that refers to them as catalysts for development. Hence, designing one course, especially in a socio-economic context that neglects the relationality of our existence, might be limited regarding its immediate impact on current (unsustainable) business practices. Yet, transformation always implies operating in an in-between in which the old system is still in place for the lack of a system yet to come. Hence, such 'decaf' approaches to relationality – stressing contingency and composition without immediately assuming a posthuman decentering of the human - are crucial first steps for developing management education in a way that contributes to sustaining our existence on this planet.

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