

Building Alternative Urban Scenarios



AIM OF ACTIVITY

Students work in groups to develop imagined future urban spaces and then build material prototypes of them. This activity directly engages students' imagination, creativity and 'hand knowledge' and also foregrounds the materiality of learning.

I undertake this activity with students in my third year International Development module on Urban Futures; it would work in any social science class focusing on urban challenges or with engineering and design students. This activity can also be used in extra-curricular workshops to materially explore students' visions of diverse futures.

ACTIVITY OUTLINE

1. Room preparations

For this activity, it is especially important that the room is set up to convey to students the expectation that they will be creative, experiment and work with different materials. This sets the right tone from the beginning, by creating an atmosphere that can activate students' playful sides and awaken childhood memories, for example through the smell of Play-Doh.

I had set up tables for groups of 5 to 7 students, covered with lots of thinking materials (sticky notes, marker pens, stickers, large sheets of paper, photos, quotes), building materials (crafty stuff, Play-Doh, pipe cleaners, foam sheets, pins, string, LEGO and wooden blocks) and a random object as an element of ambiguity. I also played some background music and provided snack to signal that this was a more informal and fun workshop.

It is also important to allocate enough time - at least 3 hours - for this activity. Alternatively, activity could incorporate a substantial research component and run over several weeks alongside lectures and seminar discussions.

ACTIVITY OUTLINE

2. Build your dream house (warm-up exercise)

To get students into a more creative mind set, I gave everybody a handful of Lego and asked them to build a model of their ideal house of the future. Everybody then explained their house in 1 minute. (This activity draws on Lego Serious Play).

3. Explain workshop objective

I explained scenarios as stories of possible futures used by designers to imagine and prototype new ideas, in this case about alternative urban futures. To help students get started, I presented them with some broad guiding questions: What do we want future urban spaces to look like? How can we get there? Who will participate and in what ways? To connect the activity to the overall module, I had decided to focus it on Brighton, which also connected it back to the urban manifesto exercise students had done at the beginning of term. I also explained that scenario are based on in-depth research about their focus areas, in this case Brighton and how it might be impacted by larger-scale forces such as the Covid-19 pandemic, environmental change, political changes including Brexit and macro-economic forces.

Lastly, I reiterated that the activity was not about coming up with correct answers or solutions but about engaging in a creative process with fellow students to imagine, in hands-on and fun ways, possible actions towards more liveable, equitable and inclusive futures. The emphasis was on generating new, including utopian, ideas rather than getting bogged down in details, finding failure or analyzing limitations.

ACTIVITY OUTLINE

4. Building

Keeping with the topics of the overall module, I had set up tables focusing on issues of governance, infrastructures and conviviality and students self-selected by sitting on the table with the topic that interested them most.

In the interest of time I had pre-developed a scenario; for longer workshops this visioning is the first step in the process.

'In 2050, Brighton will be a self-sustaining, hospitable and generous city. Its environmental footprint is minimal, it is welcoming of diversity and assures all its residents a decent quality of life.' (to Genna, highlight as quote or box)

The building was guided by a handout that specified a more concrete vision for each group, and asked them to firstly map all the existing institutions in Brighton relevant for their topic and then to imagine additional actions, things, ideas, laws, behaviors etc that would be necessary to achieve their specific scenario. In parallel students started building prototypes of their scenarios with the materials at hand.

Students then think about who is participating in enacting these transformations and who might be affected by them, in positive and adverse ways. During this step they can also actively think about their own role in this change project.

ACTIVITY OUTLINE

5. Shareout and Debrief

We finished the activity by visiting each table and groups explaining their build and what it manifested. Depending on time availability, these presentations could be longer and more structured, and groups could also come together to combine their ideas into a 'big build' that addresses urban spaces more holistically.

Each creative activity needs to be followed by a collective discussion session in order to draw out students' learning and connect it to the larger topics of the class. I often do that in the following class, after sending students a short survey with some reflection questions.

READING SUGGESTIONS

Section from Creative Universities Book (including pedagogical groundings)

- Pages 70-77

As this was the final class of term, there were no required readings but I had suggested that students read an article describing a similar activity.

- Willis, A. M. (2014). Designing back from the future. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 12(2), 151-160.

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- James, A. R. (2013). Lego Serious Play: a three-dimensional approach to learning development. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (6).