Future Visioning for Sustainable Household Practices:
Spaces for Sustainability Learning?

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Structure

- Visioning for sustainable futures
- ConsEnSus visioning workshops
- Evaluating spaces for sustainability learning
  - Imagining future spaces
  - Spaces for collaborative engagement
  - Reflective spaces
- Results
- Conclusion and outlook

The role of imagination in Geography

- Long history: travelers' tales of early explorations
- Current discourse: geographical imaginations related to power, knowledge and spatiality
- Practices of mapping, visualizing, environmental reconstruction and climatic scenario building

Envisioning sustainable futures

- Roots: Literary utopian visions
- Recent focus: ‘Ecotopias’ as navigational compasses for more sustainable practices (de Gues 2002)
- ‘Critical design’ in urbanism and sustainability: merge design approaches with utopian thinking (Visioning = key goal of Critical Design) (Janssen 2008)

Transition Management and Visioning

- Combination of social and technological innovations required for change
- Multi-stakeholder approach essential to shape innovations and break from current trends
- Develop new insights by using participatory design process for desirable futures + devise transition steps

Visioning for sustainable futures

Despite widespread concern about unsustainable production and consumption practices:

→only **incremental** shifts in routinised production and consumption behaviour in Western industrialized societies

→**Future visioning techniques** as one solution for sustainability learning?

Visioning for sustainable futures

- Desirable future vision - 'backcast' not forecast
- Dreborg 1996: forecasting unlikely to yield transition-inducing innovations
- *"The world will not evolve past its current state of crisis by using the same thinking that created the situation"* (Albert Einstein)

Spatial Practices and Visioning

- Physical space to visioning process can create learning processes at the cognitive level (Brown et al 2003)

'Lower order (adaptive) learning':

- *policy learning* (Hall 1993) *organizational learning* (Argyris and Scheon 1978, Kim 1993)

'Higher order (conceptual) learning':

- problem and goal re-definition & changes of values, attitudes or underlying convictions (Quist and Vergragt 2006)

Spatial Practices and Visioning

Aim of research paper:

- Discuss construction and efficacy of physical and cognitive spaces for sustainability learning (through visioning process)
- Reflect on empirical findings from ConsEnSus visioning workshops (www.consensus.ie)

ConsEnSus Visioning Workshops

- Aim of Consensus Visioning Workshops: **Brainstorming innovations for more sustainable personal washing and heating practices in Ireland in 2050**
- Participation of civil, public and private stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds
- **Research Question:** How is learning embodied in participants' experience of process?
- **Test: Survey of Participants:**
  - Novel ideas developed? (lower order learning)
  - Stimulated to think about SD in different ways? (higher order learning)

Brainstorming

Brainstorming

Networking

Feeding back of ideas

Rating of Ideas

Feedback and Emerging Themes

- **Positive evaluation** by most participants of opportunity to **engage** with people from a range of backgrounds and of the **time and space to think** about important issues
- Three interrelated themes emerged:
  1. **Futurity**
  2. **Collaboration**
  3. **Reflection**

→ All intersect with expanded notions of space

1) Imagining future spaces I

Liberation of current practices seen as key driver for higher order learning

- *"Visioning is a way of breaking our narrow bands of thinking" (architect)*
- *" Refreshing to commentate on the positive without having to 'over-think' the plausibility. It did prompt me to think in a different way. I will consider using this technique in my own work." (consumer organisation representative)*
- *"I liked the opportunity to imagine the future of society and technology" (architect)*

1) Imagining future spaces II

"…interesting discussions on cultural changes and their influence on water consumption" (designer)

However:

Difficulty for some to imagine dramatically altered realities in 2050:

- *"Pragmatism is hard to suppress" (engineer)*

Nevertheless, multi-stakeholder approach valid:

- "It may be wise to, next to visionary people, also involve participants with more practical, strategic, executor and near-term thinking styles" (Van de Kerkhof and Wieczorek 2005: 739)

2) Spaces for collaborative engagement

- Participant diversity serves as a positive mechanism in the generation of a spectrum of holistic ideas
- *"The large group opened up a large range of insights, I see it as a valuable way to achieve a unique perspective on sustainability problem areas"(Designer)*
- *"The workshop produced a good melting pot of people who wouldn't perhaps share ideas normally" (Architect)*

3) Reflective spaces I

Evaluation of the workshops revealed moments of overt and explicit reflection:

→ During brainstorming process:

- *"[the process] has helped me to review or reconsider previous views on certain topics'"(designer)*

→ During consolidation phase:

- *"I really enjoyed the 'voting' and the follow up talk. It was so interesting to see how the ideas could merge into a theme" (communications consultant)*

3) Reflective spaces II

Difficult balance: time versus attendance / diversity

- *'lots of interesting people, no time to talk to enough of them' (Architect)*
- *'[the] [b]rainstorm was good fun. The least enjoyable [element] was the length - it should have been longer!'. (Consumer council representative)*

Evaluation of Workshops

- Space important in terms of learning – different kinds of spatiality: physical, intellectual space (futurity, collaboration, reflection)
- However, visioning workshops are inevitably isolated experiments in interaction, creativity, reflection and innovation:

"Learning impacts may be transient unless 'tacit', or context specific knowledge gained by workshop participants can be successfully translated into 'explicit' knowledge that can be incorporated into the modus operandi of the organisations from which participants derived." (Davies et al 2011).

Conclusion

- "Evidence from the visioning experiments suggests that **both higher and lower order sustainability learning can and does take place** at a personal and inter-personal level **at least in the short term**." (Davies et al 2011)
- "Whether this **learning** can be **translated** into **more wide ranging and embedded change** demands both extensive and expansive longitudinal studies of socio-technical systems and an intricate analysis of links between individual and organisational decision-making." (Davies et al 2011)

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Thank you for your attention!

For more information on the Consensus project, please go to:

www.consensus.ie

Workshop participants

Sector	Energy Visioning Workshop	Water Visioning Workshop
Public / semi-state	Energy regulation (1) Energy agency (2) Housing authority (1) Planning (1) Environmental awareness (1)	Engineering (1) Planning/urban design (2) Architecture (3) Regulation (1) Policy making (1) Consumer council (1)
Private	Architecture (3) Energy supply (1) Plumbing (1) Engineering (2) Energy auditing (1) Sustainability communications (1)	Water supply (3) Washing products industry (2) Product design (1) Sustainability communicat. (1) Engineering (1) Architecture (2)
NGO / Research	Futures research (2) Environmental policy research (2) Energy poverty agency (2)	Planning (1) Environmental Awareness (!)