

Tenkuä. Futures Literacy for Social Innovation: Designing Alternative Visions for Broken Cities

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ABSTRACT: This work presents the first results of two years of work of Tenkuä, a futures and social impact workshop created by CENTRO, a Mexican higher education institution specialized in creativity. Reference is made to the game that was created to facilitate the teaching of the workshop. Likewise, the authors reflect on the scope of the nine iterations that have been carried out to date, as well as the pending subjects of the project.

Keywords: Futures literacies. Social innovation. Social impact. Futures studies. Citizenship.

1 INTRODUCTION

CENTRO is a higher education institution focused on the professionalization of creativity. The campus is located in a depauperate district of Mexico City, which faces complex challenges related with crime, inequality, public services deficiencies and under commitment in initiatives that require social participation, among others.

The project started with a scheme in which participants detect fissures in their neighborhoods and use this information as an input to imagine alternative futures (possible, probable, preposterous and desirable futures), designing the best pathways to achieve the desirable scenarios and generating awareness about the impact of social action during the process.

How can an educational institution contribute to solving these challenges, these “fissures”? It is the question that originated the project. The Hub of Social Design and the Department of Futures Studies of CENTRO formulated a prefatory answer to this question: we are an educational institution, so let us create an educational experience that can provide some tools to imagine and deliver alternative scenarios for our community.

This work aims to present the results achieved during the first two years of the project, which in the first stage was called Time Capsule and in a later stage, Tenkuä (a Nahuatl expression that means “broken”).

The project has been developed between 2017 and 2019 and has included nine workshops with 131 participants from three cities (Mexico City , and Bogotá and Pasto in Colombia), including sessions with the general public; sessions with players from the neighborhood where CENTRO it is located; and an evaluation edition with experts from Cumulus Bogotá [1] conference 2019.

In 2017 the Social Design Hub [2] and the Future Studies Department of CENTRO designed the first edition of Time Capsule, a collaborative workshop to ideate future scenarios for communities facing social problems (that is, virtually any human community!). It is a six-hour experience for all types of audience, and it encompasses the following stages:

1. Immersion talk about the Foresight framework.
2. Briefing and Foresight analysis. Monographs of the different neighborhoods represented in the workshop, their characteristics, social problems (fissures) and resources.
3. Drafting. Ideation of long-term scenarios based on this information.
4. Social imaging. Display of scenario visualization through magazine covers of the future.
5. Wrapping up and synthesis about what could be done to avoid desirable futures and specify undesirable futures

For the first edition, an open call was made for CENTRO neighbors, who attended and participated with enthusiasm. Although in the beginning, we set out to direct this workshop to CENTRO's surrounding audience, players from other districts gradually began to attend; this fact made us see the potential of the experience.

2 METHODOLOGY

Futures Studies are a broad and interdisciplinary framework that provides an adequate territory for this experience. According to Wendell Bell, "The purposes of futures studies are to discover or invent, examine, and evaluate, and propose possible, probable and preferable futures" (BELL, 1997, p. 73).

In the language of futures, the starting point to detonate the prospective reflection is the signal (that is, the significant fact in the present that is somehow interpreted as an indicator of change). In order to facilitate the problematization and the understanding that we are in a transitory state towards more desirable scenarios, the participants must discuss which signals can be considered critical for the upcoming years, and use this information as a compass to imagine what could happen in the following years if everything goes wrong (a pessimistic scenario) if everything goes right (an optimistic scenario). Then, the players must choose between desirable and undesirable scenarios, then creating paths to achieve the desirable and to avoid the undesirable.

In order to give a structure to all experience, we used the generic frame proposed by Joseph Voros (2003) for a foresight sprint. The phases referred above correspond to this architecture:

1. Inputs
2. Foresight Work
3. Outputs
5. Strategy

To make the literacy process easier, the team designed a card game that went through different phases. The purpose of this material is to facilitate the use of concepts as "signal/fissure," "trend," "futures archetype" and to make it easy

to visualize and communicate the different problems that communities may face when living in cities (although not exclusively). For that purpose, we included a range of critical topics related to the Right to the city, which in words of words of Henri Lefebvre.

“[...] manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the oeuvre, to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city.” (CARDWELL, 2019, 2010, p. 7).

Using the cards, the players can identify the fissures or signals of the critical issues on their districts, and they put this information in common, using them as inputs for the foresight work.

Once the team has a collection of fissures around the topics they chose, the players must elaborate futures scenarios, considering potential, possible, plausible, probable, preferable and unexpected futures (VOROS, 2003, p. 12). These visions can be presented as written stories, covers of imaginary magazines or cardboard artifacts, depending on the time available for the session.

These “future dummies” express, sometimes in an ironic way, sometimes in a humorous or even tragic way, the desires, the fears and values shared by the participants around the issues that were addressed. These products express Arjun Appadurai’s claim that the future is a cultural fact (APPADURAI, 2013).

Since CENTRO is a higher education institution that trains designers, among other creativity professionals, it is common that in the workshops held on the campus there are undergraduate or graduate students in design present at the sessions. These participations are very useful for modeling scenarios, in these cases designers are assigned to the different teams to assist the visualization process and facilitate the design of future covers. It should be noted that in these cases designers are requested to try to capture the feelings of the participants by adding

value and not distorting their proposals. Accordingly, designers assume an active role of intermediaries between the social imaginaries and the visions of futures.

3 RESULTS

During the first two years, there have been nine workshops with the participation of 131 attendees including students, professors, neighbors, general public on three different locations: CENTRO (Mexico City), Universidad de los Andes (Bogota, Colombia) and Universidad de Nariño (Pasto, Colombia). In the specific case of Universidad de los Andes, the session happened in the context of the Cumulus Conference, so we took advantage of the meeting to have specialized feedback to improve the materials and the extensive experience in terms of design.

These iterations have allowed us to observe that it is not difficult for participants, with the right context, language and materials, to make futures a topic of conversation. They also find it easy to identify the critical points of their districts and discuss what needs to be changed for those critical points. We also observe that players understand the importance of their influence to achieve a favorable change concerning the problems that occur in their neighborhoods.

During the process, participants must discover that all cities are broken at some level, but the idea is that they also understand that this is a transitory condition and our citizen action can contribute in some sense to change this. Tenkuä provides a safe and controlled space where attendants can explore and express their tensions and manifest common concerns about how to do this, how to avoid unwanted futures, and how to achieve the desirable scenarios. In this regard, we can say that Tenkuä has allowed us to contribute to the language of futures literacy.

4 CONCLUSION

Our major challenge and pendant task is to transform all the accrued know-how into concrete actions. Going from outputs to strategy is one of our unsolved issues, Tenkuä must contribute to generating ideas about change and that these ideas will inspire actions in the present.

Cities function as complex artificial systems. It is exponential growth (and its effects) generates constant challenges that require the participation of everyone in the design of solutions. Learning new ways of acting in the face of social and environmental challenges (latent or manifest) is presented as the only alternative to turn problems into opportunities. Doing so requires our knowledge, ideas and skills, in combination with a great ability to think in advance.

If we retake the generic structure of Joseph Voros, the prospective output should lead to the strategy, but the visions of futures are still abstract. A cover of an imaginary magazine can be inspiring as a vision, but to accomplish that desirable vision or to avoid an undesirable one, a method is necessary, we need more literacy for strategy.

Our second task is to embody the language of Circular Economy (ELLEN MACARTHUR FOUNDATION, 2013, p. 7) in the game:

A circular economy is an industrial system that is restorative or regenerative by intention and design. It replaces the 'end-of-life' concept with restoration, shifts towards the use of renewable energy, eliminates the use of toxic chemicals, which impair reuse, and aims for the elimination of waste through the superior design of materials, products, systems, and, within this, business models.

We believe that the circular economy framework will provide an interesting opportunity for the prototyping of solutions that can be implemented and tested in the short and medium-term, so we will explore this possibility in 2020.

Finally, a pending subject is to transform the materials collected in each of the workshops (the scenarios, the covers of magazines of the future) into information susceptible to anthropological analysis. According to Wendell Bell, one of the crucial tasks of future studies is to analyze the visions of the future and in this sense, Tenkuä offers an optimal territory for this.

What do the covers refer to? What social fears are expressed in those visions? What yearnings are expressed in the scenarios? How do the participants consider it to be an extravagant future? What similarities and significant differences can we identify? among participants from different countries? These are some of the questions we must answer.

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