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The Future Workshop

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Abstract

Heino Apel, The Future Workshop

The Future Workshop was originally developed for citizen groups with limited resources who wanted a say in the decision making process. It is a technique meant to shed light on a common problematic situation, to generate visions about the future, and to discuss how these visions can be realised.

The paper describes the origin of the method. The methodological steps (phases) of the method are explained and in the second part there is a discussion of the strengths and weakness of the approach guided by the experience of the author.

Die Zukunftswerkstatt wurde ursprünglich für Bürgerinitiativen mit begrenzten Ressourcen, die ein Mitspracherecht in Entscheidungsprozessen haben wollten, entwickelt. Die Technik soll dazu verhelfen, eine gemeinsame Problemstellung auszuleuchten, um Visionen für die Zukunft zu entwickeln und eine Diskussion über diese Visionen zu ermöglichen.

Das Dokument beschreibt den Ursprung dieser Methode. Die methodologischen Schritte (Phasen) dieser Methode werden erklärt. Im zweiten Teil diskutiert der Autor – geführt von seiner eigenen Erfahrung – die Stärken und Schwächen der Zukunftswerkstatt.

The Future Workshop

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By Heino Apel

1. Basic Information about the Future Workshop

In the 1970's, the future workshops have been developed as a tool in the political fight of civil action groups for a better enforcement of their interests to create a future worth to live for. The founder Robert Jungk wanted to enable the development of social fantasy that should lead to conflict resolutions that – free of any inherent necessities – can be turned against the unimagitiveness and the profit-seeking of the present circumstances.

Methodically, the future workshops have two roots. With recourse to Hegel and Marx, a binary social-economic model has been drawn. Here, the belief prevailed in the good qualities of the human being who is only „alienated“ by the social circumstances. After the era of 1968 Marx' vision of the proletariat which is destined by history to be the source of a liberated society mutated in the heads of many intellectuals into a vision of civil action groups which were going to be the utopian core of a new society to come. The critical citizen turns into an emancipated subject, becoming his own attorney before the state. According to the “Frankfurter Schule” that is based upon Hegel's dialectics, problems are solved by critique. Critique exposes and un-masks the present circumstances. Accordingly, the negation of the negation results in a new dimension of cognition. So the future workshop starts with a critique phase and in the decisive fantasy phase, the negation of the critique points is taken as the starting point.

The second root is based upon Jungk's contact with American creativity techniques with which he became acquainted during his research for his book “Der Atomstaat” (“The Nuclear State”) (1979) in the Pentagon.

Now, after nearly three decades, the sociopolitical basic understanding, on which the principles of the future workshop are based, has changed. The emancipatory ap-

proach to make use of the knowledge of experts in creative working forms and by using moderation techniques is by no means out-of-date. Finally, a future workshop is also a working method of self-controlled learning. Visualisation and a change of methods – which are the core elements of a future workshop – are of course the instruments of a modern seminar. The creative techniques are still ‘booming’ in moderation and education processes.

The method according to Jungk/Müllert (1987):

A „classic“ future workshop consists of five phases.

1. The *Preparation phase*: Here, the method, its rules and the scheduled course of the workshop (in accordance with the participants) is introduced. As a first step, it is possible to prepare the room for the workshop together with the participants (if not already done before). All tables that might separate the participants from one another should be removed from the middle of the room or put outside. Pinboards, paper, pencils etc. should be available and at hand. The participants should be seated in an open circle to be able to interact and go to the pinboards at any time.
2. Originally, the *Critique phase* is the start of the workshop. Here, the problem is investigated critically and thoroughly. First of all, a visualised brainstorming is performed and a general and critical question concerning the problem is framed. The critique points are written on small cards.¹ Normally, this is made in groups and in the sense of brainstorming, where the following rules apply: no excessive discussions, associative linking to ideas already existent, no ‘killer phrases’, quantity has first priority (collecting), etc. The results found are written on cards (visualised insights) and grouped accordingly to topics (‘clustered’) and the groups are titled. After this, a selection of the relevant points can be evaluated. Occasionally, it is also useful to intensify the collection of critique points in a second phase. Here, a change of method is possible, so that also a reflective discussion can be performed, but as well with the obligation to visualise the results in the end.
3. After dealing with the problem, the future workshop does not immediately search for the solution. First, all participants try to work out an utopia, to draw an exaggerated picture of future possibilities. In this so-called *Fantasy phase* a relaxed atmosphere should prevail that must be created both with regard to the room and

by playing games. The transition may be made e.g. by fantasy trips, meditation, medial support, etc. One can also begin with the conversion of the selected essential critique points found in the critique phase (negation of the negation). That way, the participants are free from inherent necessities and may use brainstorming techniques and creative games to find and to reflect utopian solutions. The basic criterion for the selection of the presentation form is that they should be completely different from usual, only rationally orientated problem solutions. The solutions/strategies found that way should be an original and rich source of really trend-setting ways. All ideas are collected and put into an 'idea store', regardless of their practicability. In a second step (which can be also performed later in the implementation phase), all those ideas have to be 'transformed', that is, they must be reduced to a practical and realizable core.

According to Robert Jungk, the social fantasy of the participants is developed in this phase. Or, to be more pragmatic, it is the point to alienate a problem solution and to present it in 'false', 'untypical' and not strictly rational forms and/or texts like e.g. painting, role plays, sketch, reports and so on. This has a creativity-promoting effect, because here, in a very relaxed atmosphere, far away from the stress of everyday life and profession, expression forms can be found and things and ideas may outcrop which could possibly not be figured out by using a direct and 'rational' approach.

4. In the *Implementation phase* the ideas found are checked and evaluated in regard to their practicability. If a solution has been found, it is finally written down, who does when, what, where and how (action plan). This note-book of duties is the log book for the subsequent *permanent workshop* (5th phase) – the realization of the solution concepts (see also fig.1)

In the extreme case, each phase can be „run through“ within one hour (short workshop). More frequently is the "Weekend-Workshop" with each phase taking half a day and – rarely – workshops over a period of five days (e.g. during an educational leave).

¹ In the classic workshop no cards are used, but all participants write down the points on a big sheet of paper lying on the ground or on a table. Later, the points are cut out and grouped. This method creates a stronger nearness than an isolated card-writing.

Phases of the Future Workshop

Critique phase:

- Designed to draw out specific issues and problems in question/producing a critical understanding of the problem
- Steps:
 - Collection of critique points (by written cards/brainstorming)
 - Systematisation (clustering) on a pin board
 - Evaluation, condensation, intensification, priorities

Fantasy phase:

- Imaginative introduction (meditation, work, walks ...)
- Turn critique points into the opposite (bad to good) as starting points
- Collect ideas (brain writing)
- Preparing and performing a role play, fable, report, painting, fairytale to a fantastic story (as group work)
- A common analysis of these performances with regard to good solutions/ideas
- Extract, write down an "idea store" on a pin board

Implementation phase:

- Evaluate the concepts of the "idea store" with regard to realistic conditions and best fit (PM-method)
- Put in more concrete terms, the best-suited concepts (group work)
- Choose the best one
- Build an action plan:
Who does what, where, when and how?

Fig. 1 : Schematic presentation of the (main) phases of a future workshop

Modern future workshops which all refer to their founders, may differ noticeably in tendency as well as in detail.

Today, mostly "method workshops" are realized with the objective to illustrate the method of the future workshop by using any example.

The classic case of a citizen group performing a future workshop for their actions, has barely happened since the 1980's due to the weakness of the initiative movement. The most frequent form of application is to be found in educational institutions with the emphasis on educational and organisational topics. So the tool of action politics has become a resolution concept for theoretical and process-orientated questions. A future workshop under the designation of "The future of environmental education" and performed with students has the function to get the participants out of their everyday life in university and to make them sensitive for future planning concepts rather as to give them concrete and better perspectives for actions. Partitions of the organisation development as e.g. the question of future organisation structures or for a new corporate identity can be of course successfully handled in a future

workshop, provided that certain conditions have been agreed upon in advance by participants and principals. Lately and in the context of the local "Agenda 21" the future workshop is used and/or discussed increasingly in its original meaning as a tool of the "civil action groups".

Methodically, the future workshops can be roughly classified according to which extent they promote creativity and/or how strong the moderator emphasizes non-rational performance elements. In short words: workshops can be classified as being conducted "intuitively" or "top-heavily".

As a general rule, the methods of a future workshop depend largely upon the methods and biographical background of the moderators.

Finally, the search of utopia in the fantasy phase can also be interpreted pragmatically as finding resolutions by using creative techniques and not strictly in the sense of Jungk as creative evocation of social fantasy of the participants. Among other things, this may lead to an integration of a fantasy phase into "normal" moderations in order to motivate the participants to find unerring and inventive solutions.

2. The Strong Points of the Concept "Future Workshops"

More and more, the principle to take the participants seriously and not to restrict them by any defaults, but to give them well-structured scope for a creative development, has gained ground in the management theories. The techniques of a future workshop to make the knowledge and experiences of the participants productive are in greater demand than ever before.

The current debate concerning Lifelong Learning requires self-controlled learning in groups where the participants choose their own aims and define what they want to intensify, which problems they see and which solutions are appropriate. This way, the future workshops of today are still giving progressive methodical impulses.

The process of working hard for a solution results in an intensive identification with the results and so a high acceptance for their future realisation.

Future workshops are based upon "Social Learning" which is lately high-praised by constructivists in the educational sciences. This form of communication and/or the common struggle to find new resolutions, the presentation in different forms (role

plays, drawings, etc.) helps the individual person to find out in their personal reconstruction of reality, what is up.

3. Problems and Difficulties of the Concept “Future Workshops”

Independently from all advantages described above, there are of course also obstacles and weak points in the concept.

3.1. Consistency of the phases, inherent conflicts

The critique phase, fantasy phase and implementation phase are three very different elements regarding the method as well as the concept and their developments are all open-ended. In the ideal case, there has to be a consistent development of topics between the different phases. That is, a perfect future workshop should enable the participants to find accomplishable core questions accepted by the complete group within the schedule of the critique phase. In the beginning of the subsequent fantasy phase, appropriate questions have to be framed that can lead to “productive” utopian presentations by using creative techniques. From these presentations, all “exciting” ideas must be filtered out and must be transformed into practicable ideas. In the implementation phase, all participants should have the competence and maintain an “ideological” distance to separate the best-suited and most practicable solutions from all results found. In the action plan some actors have to be found who are qualified for the execution of the questions commissioned. This is a very demanding programme for a single moderator and given a short time period. (For a single moderator and a short time period this is a very demanding programme)

The following questions may arise:

- Is the result of the critique phase suitable for the beginning of the fantasy phase?
- Does the start of the fantasy phase really quicken the fantasy and does it finally achieve its purpose?

- How can we constructively (and not destructively) use the results of the critique phase in the fantasy phase?
- Which criteria are suitable for sorting the utopian ideas?
- Is the transformation from utopia to reality made in the fantasy phase or only later in the implementation phase?
- How can we deduct practicable concepts/strategies from utopian ideas for the implementation phase?
- How can we avoid that inherent necessities “strike back” in the implementation phase and that the free flow of ideas has been in vain?
- How can we motivate hesitant participants who are afraid of the requirements of implementation?

3.2. The critique phase – always the best beginning?

From the learning psychology’s point of view, all the critique and sinking into difficulties may surely have a demotivating effect. E.g., reports and news about environmental issues are often full of disastrous metaphorical expressions. A group may easily turn desperate facing the list of negative news and information about the environment that they are confronted with every day and which they are now collecting in the critique phase. Why not starting by collecting positive examples, if one intends to design a better world? It is the aim of the critique phase to acquaint the group with all details of the problem. This method should be in keeping with the real facts and must not obligingly be in critical form. Here, the “funnel principle” of the method must not be forgotten. That is, the group must work its way from a very broad basis to the essential points. If the workshop starts in a balancing way (e.g. with the question “what do we like and what not?”), then the participants will find themselves in a position for better solutions, since they are collecting the positive arguments and ideas rather than having the negative dialectics. From his own experiences in the environmental section, the author recommends to define the “critique phase” as the “problem-finding phase”.

3.3. The effects of creative techniques – a prescribed utopia?

It is doubtful, if a group of participants can be transferred into a state of overflowing ideas on command or merely by methodical tricks. Even creative techniques have limits. Much depends on the general atmosphere and also on a relaxed and easy-

going moderator. Frequently, the participants lack the courage to abstract from inherent necessities. Anything that is produced in the fantasy phase, might already exist in reality. If it is possible to free the group or the individual persons from any inhibitions or blocks so that they can develop a undisturbed “normal” group productivity, the workshop can be called successful. The factor of time pressure (e.g. during the brainwriting) and the changed perspective in the role plays, during the painting, etc. make at least sure that a lot of ideas are produced and so the group can bring more about as if they are just debating with each other.

3.4. The time factor – same measure for different processes

Communication, understanding, agreement and acceptance, etc. are cognitive performances that take their own time. This can be proved by experiences already made in seminars. E.g. the critique phase is fairly good to plan. As mentioned above, a relaxed atmosphere and unusual presentation forms are indispensable for creative work which cannot be forced into a rigid time schedule. Ideas might be better found under pressure of time than if the time is unlimited. Also a night’s break between two workshop phases and a relaxed evening together might noticeably change the group’s dynamics and the object-orientation.

3.5. The realisation of the realisation – who will support the group “afterwards”?

Usually, the solutions and strategies found in innovative future workshops exceed “normal” or present strategies and therefore their realization has to face stronger resistance. Their realization is far more difficult than the realization of “normal” solutions and sometimes this task may ask too much of the actors defined in the action plan. Therefore, the realisation of unconventional strategies might fail without a continued process attendance. When planning the workshop, a later subsequent attendance that can be prepared as a process support for the realisation should be arranged by all means.

3.6. The role of the moderator

The assignment of the moderation of a future workshop to a person is not only a question of the assumed professionalism of the moderator but also a question of confidence between the group and the moderator. In the ideal case, there should be an intensive preparatory talk with most of the potential participants and after that the group can decide if they are willing to venture a future workshop with this moderator.

Also in advance, the aims of the moderation should be determined and as well which conclusions should be drawn after the moderation.

The stimulating role of the moderator whenever the critique, the ideas or the evaluation of strategies are stagnating, is a tight rope walk between mental support and manipulation. Is it the aim of the phases to bring out everything that lies within the possibilities of the participants or should the moderator try to elevate the participants with additional stimuli to a “higher level” which he himself just manages to have a clear view of?

An important function and relevant for the outcome is the form of the transition between the phases and the initial questions (e.g. the form of the fantasy question and/or the task for the fantasy phase). Here, the moderator is highly responsible for the success of finding a solution.

3.7. Dealing with hierarchies and disparate objectives

As a general rule, all participants of a group are regarded as equal and this rule applies of course also for the participants of future workshops. In a civil action group, there are of course different participants regarding their social status, their education and training, their sex and their age, but in their intention they are equal and like-minded persons. This fact may change if a future workshop is e.g. performed to develop the organisation of a company. The idea (the purpose of the future workshop) that all participants want to develop the best possible company structure is just a nice fiction that is much too unspecific and might dash easily against the present (and unalterable) personal structures at any time. A workshop for the future department structure of a company may be regarded by the participants as a participating instrument of co-determination, but the head of the department and the staff manager might have different intentions, such as to find out, what the employees really think, how strong is their identification with the company and to which extent they apply themselves personally. The classic themes of the 1970's for which the workshops have been intended, consisted in the confrontation of opposing targets. But meanwhile this “Culture of opposition” has changed. Now much in demand are the “Alliance concepts” which should serve to produce something common out of many different ideas and not merely bring down the lowest common denominator of all participants. Is the “classic” future workshop capable to fulfil this? In the alliance model,

one has to set out from many facts that can be accepted or refused. Instead of asking, "what concerns us all?" one can also ask e.g. "how can we find a middle course?" The fantasy phase, too, requires a basic idea which is at least to a certain degree homogenous. Otherwise, the utopian vision of one person might be regarded with horror by another.

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