Future Workshop in Action: A Teaching Approach for the Attainment of Sustainable Development Goals

Imagining Tomorrow: Facilitating a Future Workshop with Young Global Citizens

On Day 8 of our short course in Binh Dinh, Vietnam, under the theme *Building Our Future*, I ran a Future Workshop with a group of 14–17-year-olds from 12 different countries. The diversity in nationality, language, culture, and lived experience made this activity both challenging and deeply empowering. The goal: to use SDG11 Sustainable Communities and Cities to collaboratively imagine and construct a future worth living in.

Phase 1: Preparation - Tone setting
Before the workshop, students submitted one-page collages answering the prompt: "Suggest one positive change you'd like to see in your local community." These one-pagers became the centerpiece of a Gallery Walk, sparking conversations as students searched for major themes that emerge through their peers' collages. From this, four key focus areas emerged:

- Cultural and Heritage Preservation
- Transportation and Infrastructure
- Waste Management
- Youth Empowerment and Participation

Based on these large headings, students self-assign per their interests - setting the stage for the following phases of the workshop. I began gauging the temperature of the room with a simple question "What is the first word that comes to your mind when you think about the future?"

Vague. Unknown. Anxiety. Confused. The responses were raw and honest, reflecting how the future felt overwhelming, especially as many were nearing the end of post-primary schools and facing external factors such as university applications or cumulative upcoming exams.

Students were introduced to the key themes, followed by self-assigning into groups of 5

In small groups, a value sort takes place in response to the question:
"What values do we need to enact positive changes in our communities?"

Phase 2: Critique - Facing the present

In this phase, each group reflected on the challenges facing their home communities within their chosen theme. The *Cultural and Heritage Preservation* group, for instance, listed the disappearance of traditional craftsmanship. Within a few minutes, a long list was created and the mood in the room dimmed, there was sympathy, but also shared frustration and hopelessness.

"Why has no one figured out a way to challenge this issue, yet?" someone said out loud to the group, a question that I, their facilitator, also did not have a straightforward answer to.

Phase 3: Fantasy – Building Without Limits

To shift gears, we introduced natural materials—sticks, leaves, seashells— alongside tape, markers, scissors, and paper waste from previous workshops and asked students to build a utopian version of their community. We began with a quick warm-up to shift students' thinking away from "what is" to "what can be." In pairs within the same small groups, students were requested to use the same complaints and change them into "what-if statements," without using any negative language.

This small constraint unlocked big ideas, and blueprints for various designs of utopic communities were crafted.

The *Sustainable Transportation and Infrastructure* group featured a tramline made from dried branches, connecting rural, urban, and indigenous hubs to one another and to resources in

downtown city center. At the heart is a large clam representing a body of water, a central natural element for the ideal community.

Phase 3 structure by Sustainable Infrastructure and Transportation group

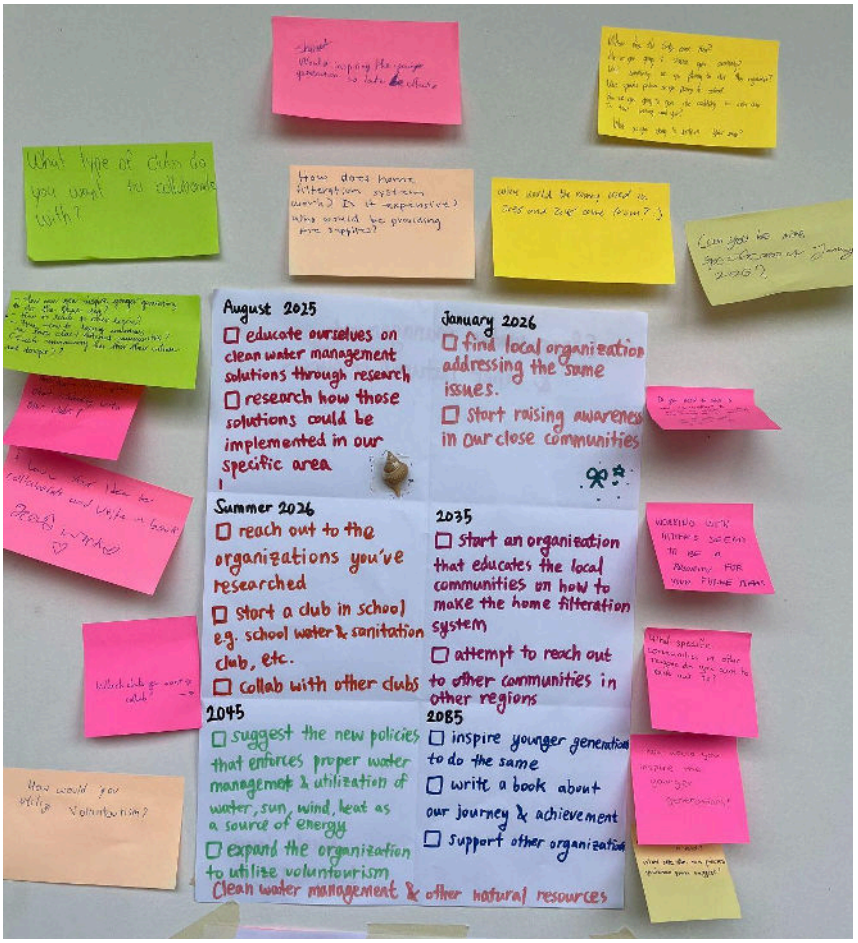
The *Cultural and Heritage Preservation* group envisioned schools within the community that teaches in the dialect/ language of the ethnic minority, rather than only providing education only in the language of the dominant group, as well as a museum/ arts space where traditional crafts are passed on rather than left to become obsolete.

Phase 4: Planning – From Vision to Action

Finally, students mapped out a timeline for implementing their ideas. On large sheets divided into six squares, each representing one moment in the future, they plotted steps toward their imagined futures.During the final Gallery Walk, students left sticky notes on each other's plans—questions, encouragement, challenges. One note read:

"What if they don't listen to you?"

It was in response to "Get in touch with the local politician/ representative to learn about the current funding of transportation." This moment highlighted the difference between students coming from representative democracies and those from more authoritarian political situations; one encourages youth participation while the other may create barriers of entry for the same.



Timeline of actions by Clean Water Management and Other Natural Resources group for Phase 4

After a final conversation with the whole group, highlighting similarities and contrasts in visions and how we wish to get there, I asked students to take 40 minutes and write a letter to themselves in 50 years-time, what have they done to get there, how do they intend on bringing the learning, the initial worry and hope forward into their future. This concluding reflection was a popular one amongst participants, who enjoyed the time and space to reflect on their learning from the four phases of the workshop.

Reflections, Considerations, and Takeaways

Facilitating the Future Workshop reminded me of the importance of future literacy and future thinking in 21st century learning. If we want students to become agents of change, we must first give them the stage to imagine the future they want to live in—the space to connect with like-minded peers, share ideas, the stage to dream together, and the time to map out how to get there.

Having facilitated the workshop, I urge practitioners to consider the diversity of the group and consequently, member's ability to engage with the workshop. Within my group, students' English language proficiencies varied greatly; hence, instructions were always a combination of auditory and visual to ensure students knew what they had to do in groups and by themselves for each activity. The language barrier also posed a challenge for group work, particularly in steps that required

democratic decision-making, such as the value sort, as students with limited language skills may feel more reserved to assert their opinions. It is crucial to have more than one facilitator in the room for every 15 participants so that issues with collaboration could be spotted early and supported if need be. Moreover, breaks are highly recommended, and should be structured in between stages, particularly between phase 2 and 3, and again before phase 4 began, as students need time to decompress after engaging with the activity and one another. In the same vein, phase 5 proved to be an excellent opportunity for students to sit with their thoughts once they have absorbed all the information of the previous phases, and make sense of the learning in the context of their own life.

The Future Workshop isn't just a tool for civic engagement in democratic societies; it's also a powerful invitation for students in more restrictive environments to believe in their capacity to shape a better future—for themselves and for others. If you're considering using this framework within the teaching and learning capacity, I'd say: do it. Be ready to adapt to your participants, listen deeply, and create space for critical thinking and creativity. Along the way, you will be inspired by young minds and floored by their creativity and energy.

Phase 3 structure by Cultural and Heritage Preservation Group