



'Absent fear': Re-envisioning a future geography

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significance fear plays, or does not play, in the practice of envisioning. Envisioning is seen as a powerful tool in the delivery of education for sustainable development, for it seeks to engage people in imagining and creating a better future. However, drawing on work undertaken with undergraduate students at the University of Glamorgan, South Wales, we argue that envisioning relies upon 'absent fear': it works to suppress, or make absent, fear as a valid response to present and future development. The presence of 'absent fear', we suggest, poses a barrier to fully engaging with the challenges and opportunities of a sustainable future, for it is difficult to conceive of a positive vision without first acknowledging and confronting our fears. It is in articulating fear, we observe, that people are more able to respond to the challenges of the future in hopeful and creative ways. Utilising work undertaken with our students this paper revisits envisioning and suggests the need to understand envisioning as a broader process of reflection and action.

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1. 'Absent fear': re-envisioning a future geography

According to Tilbury and Wortman envisioning is a powerful tool in the process of education for sustainable development, for it allows people to imagine and take responsibility for their future [1]. It is an imaginative, creative and emotional process, in which participants are asked to contemplate their desired future through a range of techniques. These can include scenario planning, histories of the future, future trees, timelines and future visualisations, all of which invite people to consider what the future will look like, be like and feel like. The purpose of these envisioning techniques is to assist people in identifying and articulating the dimensions of sustainability: present problems, aspirations for the future and the motivations and practices necessary for change. It is, then, a process of empowerment and transformation.

'Envision' is a very hopeful word and 'to envision' is an act full of promise. It carries with it very positive, almost dream-like connotations that imply optimism, enthusiasm and confidence. Consequently, to participate in a process of envisioning is to engage in something which is emotionally rewarding. Yet, implicit within the practice of envisioning is something more challenging, and perhaps even sinister, for the development of a dream rests on our ability to identify the problems, obstacles and fears we have in the present. In this, envisioning reveals a darker side, a side which may be emotionally demanding and affectively intimidating.

It is a side, however, which is often lost beneath the drive to create more positive visions of the future as a counterweight to the rampant pessimism of much twentieth-century futures thinking [2,3]. Consequently, the process of envisioning is beset by a certain utopianism, which seeks to hold at bay the fears, and uncertainties people have over the present and the future [4]. As a result envisioning, far from empowering individuals can work to suppress or make 'absent' fears and anxieties in the creation of a problem-free future.

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This paper argues that envisioning encourages ‘absent fear’; – a denial of present and future problems – and this poses a barrier to fully engaging with the challenges and opportunities of a sustainable future, for it is difficult to conceive of a positive vision without first acknowledging and confronting our fears. Utilising work undertaken with students at the University of Glamorgan, this paper reconceptualises the process of envisioning as a way of recovering and giving voice to the more fearful affects of the present and the future. It adopts image analysis as a means of analysing a series of visions produced by University of Glamorgan students, using this to identify the social and spatial limits of envisioning, before suggesting the potential of re-envisioning as a way of capturing our fears and identifying the role they play in enabling us to respond to the challenges of the future in more hopeful and creative ways.

2. Education for sustainable development

As both concept and practice sustainable development emerged into the educational consciousness in a significant way in the 1980s, impelled and encouraged by the Brundtland Commission of 1987, the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 and the Johannesburg Earth Summit of 2002. Since then it has benefited from development and mainstreaming through Agenda 21 and more recently by the United Nations, through the designation of 2005–2014 as the decade of ‘education for sustainable development and global citizenship’. Working from the precepts outlined in Agenda 21 regarding the relationship of education to sustainable development (ESD), the UN identifies ESD as a vision that aims to inclusively empower all people to take charge, co-operate and create a sustainable future through embedding sustainable development in learning and assessment.

While this is a broad aim that allows for local interpretation and application, UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are being asked to look afresh at the effectiveness of their learning and teaching strategies in delivering sustainable literacy within and across student cohorts. The motivation for this lies in concerns that today’s students have limited awareness of the unsustainable nature of current levels of development and the challenges this poses to future wellbeing and social equity [5,6]. There is anxiety that a generation is emerging who will be ill-equipped to deal with the urgent challenges associated with creating a more sustainable future.

Consequently, education for sustainable development (ESD) is being promoted as a way of empowering students to respond to these challenges. Sustainability education is not new to university curricula; many institutions have courses that develop knowledge and understanding of the concepts of sustainability. Yet this is very much education *about* sustainability, and as Hopkins and McKeown argue, this is quite distinct from education *for* sustainability [7]. The former, Sterling comments, is ‘learning as maintenance’, which rarely seeks to challenge, only to impart, accepted wisdom [8]. While this obviously has a place in advancing learner knowledge, it is the latter, with its emphasis on ‘learning as transformation’, which seeks to develop socially responsible, environmentally aware and politically critical learners.

ESD, then, should be seen as a process of transformative learning that is driven by pedagogical practice rather than curriculum content *per se*. It seeks to move away from instructive, theory-based and discrete approaches to knowledge and instead works to develop more systemic, critical and participatory modes of thought and enquiry [8]. Through participatory methods, problem-based learning and futures thinking, ESD encourages learners to view and explore the world as a complex system of social, political and environmental interdependencies whose relationship to one another is always transitory and subject to re-negotiation and re-envisioning. Discovery, collaboration and experience are central to the delivery of ESD, for it offers an approach that is intended not only to develop an analytical and enquiring mind, but to empower people and enable them to become confident agents of change [9].

ESD should not, however, be seen as an uncomplicated or uncontested panacea for the development of engaged and empowered learners. As Wals and Jickling recognise, ESD seeks to prescribe, quite narrowly, the learning outcomes of higher education, and this runs counter to prevailing educational orthodoxies which emphasise emancipation, democracy and empowerment [9]. They cite the use of ‘for’ as a particularly disturbing trend, for it suggests that education is becoming orientated towards an exclusive and narrowly defined goal, and does not, as ESD proponents claim, produce able, all round critical thinkers and actors. Thus, rather than empowering individuals, ESD can actually reduce sustainability literacy to objective and generic forms of knowing, which contradicts the very ethos underpinning it [6,10,11].

As a result, ESD can become a highly selective and partial learning experience, and this is compounded by the very language and management of ESD. Whilst the motivation for ESD came from Agenda 21, its form and substance have been heavily influenced by critical ‘futures’ and utopian thinking. In recent years these have sought to move away from negative visions of the future towards more optimistic visions, which rather than alienating people from futures thinking entice them in [3,12]. Individuals, Arbuthnott argues, are more likely to engage with futures thinking when they can see tangible changes and positive outcomes from their involvement [13]. Therefore, ensuring support and endorsement for ESD rests on creating uplifting visions of the future. This is problematic for ESD may struggle to accommodate, or prepare learners for the complexities, discontinuities and difficulties of the future.

3. Envisioning: an affective tool for education for sustainable development?

Despite these concerns ESD is gaining greater educational recognition within the UK. This is particularly so within the devolved region of Wales, where sustainable development lies at the heart of the nation’s statutory existence. As part of their commitment to sustainable development, and the importance of education in delivering this, the Welsh Government (WG), have developed ‘Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship: Action Strategy’ [5]. This seeks to develop

and embed ESD, more securely, within the higher education sector in a bid to create more systemic, interdisciplinary and critical learning approaches. In light of this, the geography subject area at the University of Glamorgan has begun to reflect on its curricula, and its associated learning and teaching strategies, in an attempt to raise awareness of the challenges associated with creating a more sustainable future. One way in which it has done this is to initiate a process of envisioning, which asks students to explore, create and reflect upon their vision for a sustainable future.

Drawing on the work of Tilbury and Wortman, the geography subject area takes envisioning as a potentially empowering process, which allows people to grasp, shape and understand the possible contours of *their* personal futures [1]. It is a process that can take a variety of creative forms – designing futures trees or futures timelines – but we invited students to draw their vision of a sustainable future. It is increasingly recognised that we need to nurture student creativity if we are to develop adaptive, inventive and imaginative responses to the complexity of the world [14,15], and by asking students to draw, a method not usually employed within social science curricula, we were presenting our students with another way of expressing, articulating and challenging themselves. The envisioning process was first used with a small group of third year, undergraduate students in a module entitled, 'Contemporary Issues in Human Geography'. This module had 11 students enrolled on it and explored the challenges of securing our future in a rapidly changing world. As part of this we wanted our students to think about the future shape and security of their everyday spaces. To initiate the envisioning process we asked them to clear their minds, close their eyes and begin to imagine the contours of their ideal future: what *they* hoped for. To prompt their thinking we asked them to consider what their future would look like, where it would be located, what it felt like and how daily life would work and move. When they had the outline of a vision in their minds we encouraged them to draw it on a sheet of A3 paper (Plates 1–3).

In presenting the envisioning process to our students we framed it in terms of their 'hopes' for the future, believing that it is hope that motivates us to imagine alternative scenarios and develop visions of a better future [16,17]. The visions that were presented, however, made us rethink this connection, for while the visions were differently authored they were strangely similar, and this similarity made us question the potential of envisioning to empower us in taking control of *our* future. Envisioning is problematic, for as Jenssen observes, we are bound by our 'expectational reflexivity'; this is our inability to think outside and beyond our pre-existing social and cultural structures [18]. What we think and how we think are conditioned by prevailing social discourses, which are complicit in delineating what a 'proper' vision of the future should look like: they define what are considered to be the desirable beliefs, values and forms behaviour to hold or enact [3]. These tend to take form through eco-centric and non-materialistic ideas of the future where environmental awareness and social equity are seen as being the most desirable traits of a future society [16]. A 'proper' vision also tends to be understood as operating at a global rather than a local scale [19]. Consequently, 'expectational reflexivity' questions whether it is possible for envisioning to capture *our* ideal future, rather, does it encompass what we are told our ideal future should be? If this is the case, envisioning, instead of helping students to develop personal and locally-responsive visions of the future, perpetuates and reinforces accepted ways of thinking and knowing that do little to challenge how we think about, shape and control the future.

Within the social sciences images are often given scant regard [20], yet this underestimates the role they play in revealing alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world. Visualising and visual representations, Rose argues, are never innocent; rather, they frame and invite us to see the world through particular ideological constructions. The power and



Plate 1. Student envisioning work.

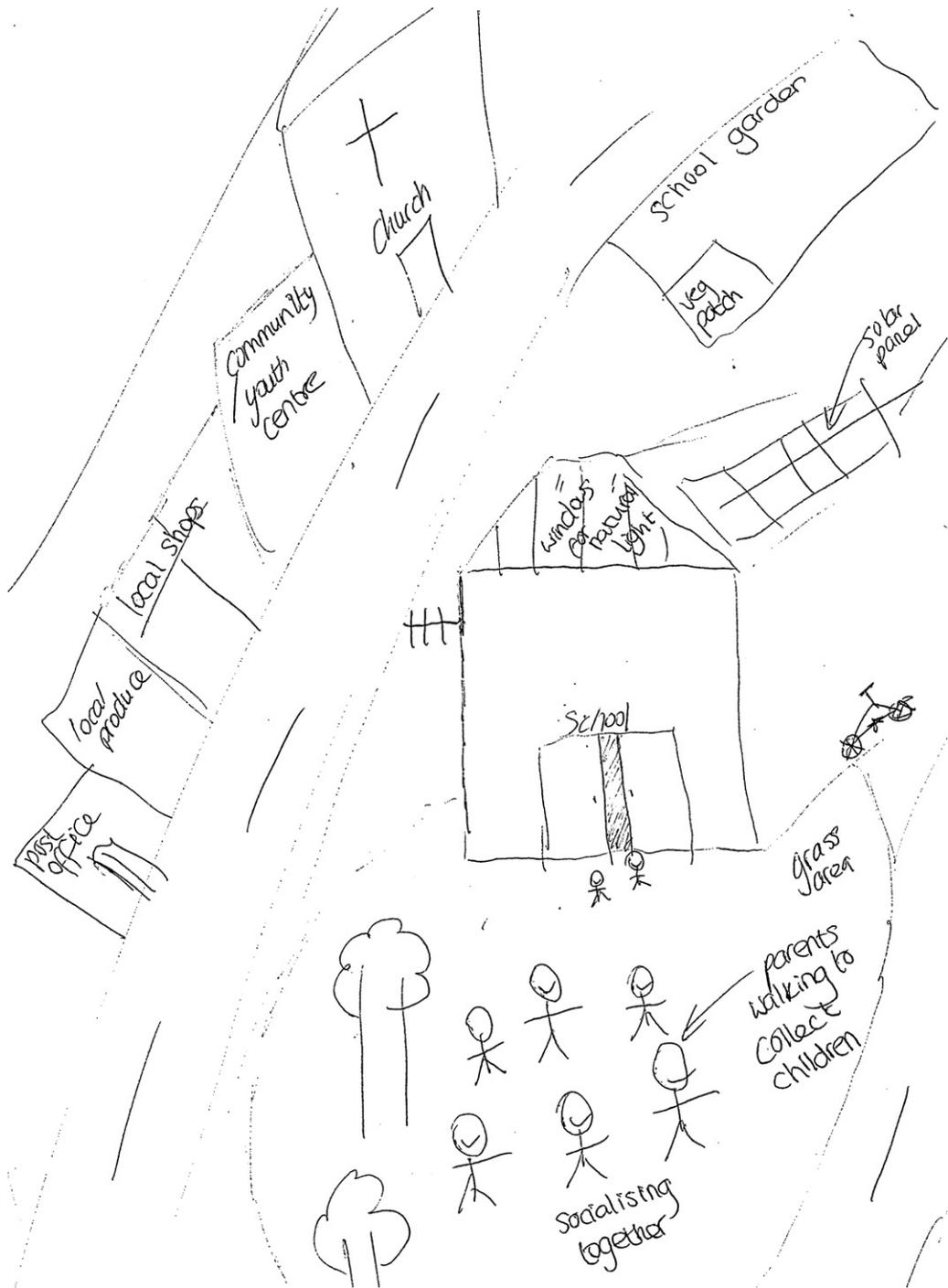


Plate 2. Student envisioning work.

persuasiveness of these constructions works through their compositional strategies – the content, motifs and spatial organisation they employ – and their sociality – the connections they indicate between the self and wider social and cultural processes. Together the composition and sociality of an image encourages us to see the world anew, but always in an intended manner; through inclusions, exclusions, spatial arrangements and social signification, images seek certain affects from the viewer. In assessing the student visions we adopt a form of image analysis that follows in these analytic traditions; the visions of the students give us access into another social world, but as we look to their compositional strategies and sociality, alternative layers of meaning and signification suggest themselves.

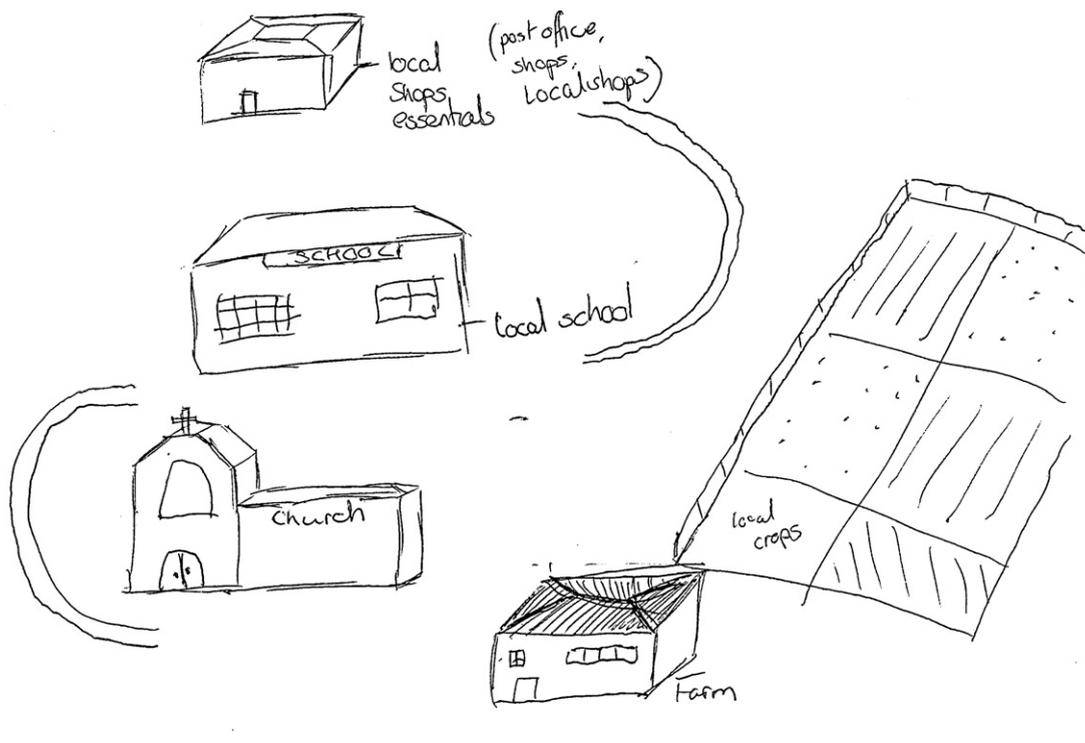


Plate 3. Student envisioning work.

As an entity the visions (Plates 1–3) are quite de-personalised in tenor, being somewhat aspatial and asocial in nature (Plate 1). The aspatial aspect comes through the absence of known localities or spatial relationships. Instead of rooting the visions in their own lived experiences, the visions adopt settings which are quite neutral and devoid of recognisable characteristics (Plates 1 and 2). For instance, many of the visions employ 'homes' as the focal point around which the ideas of a sustainable future coalesce (Plate 2). This is, however, a somewhat generic vision of the 'home' as house or shelter, rather than a space invested with personal meaning. Similarly, many of the visions are somewhat rural and nostalgic in inflection; they evoke the close-knit, self-sufficient community as the idealised norm. They infuse this with such motifs as a reliance on alternative energy, public transport provision, local food networks and community-based services that range from churches and post offices through to local schools.

The eco-centric and non-materialist nature of these motifs is reflective of a very populist language and imagery of what a sustainable future looks like. They emphasise and denote re-localisation, self-sufficiency, craft industries and community initiatives, all of which are legitimised and prioritised as 'desirable futures' by media industries, who play a powerful role in the creation, communication and public perception of sustainability [21,22]. While these may be our students' preferred futures, it behoves us to ask where the motivation for these visions, given the frequency and reoccurrence of conventional motifs of sustainability, comes from. Environmental knowledge and awareness, as Burningham and O'Brien remind us, is context dependent, what is sustainable in one location may not be sustainable in another, and so, if our visions are to be empowering they need to come from within rather than from without; they need to come from our self and our locality [23]. Where they come from outside, envisioning is at risk of dissolving into imagining a future that we have been conditioned or told to want, rather than creating one we actually want and can achieve [24].

This is reinforced by the very place-less nature of some of the visions, which instead take form through a series of recognised motifs or indicators of sustainability, such as the organic movement and antipathy to multinational corporations (Plate 1). It is as though by rooting the vision in a known place the recognisability, or legibility, of its sustainability becomes diluted: 'placing' makes the message too personal and therefore more difficult to convey. Thus, many of the visions really are no-where spaces in the true utopian sense. This lack of geography could suggest, in line with Hicks, that the visions are global rather than local in motivation, for they appeal to a 'popular' over a 'personal' discourse of sustainability [19]: the students employ a standardised and easily recognisable set of sustainability leitmotifs to ensure the validity, legibility and translatability of their work.

The asocial comes through in the way that the visions focus more on the built rather than the social environment. In Plates 2 and 3 the vision is structured through the built form, with shops, churches, schools and work places clearly visible. All of these are indicative of opportunities for social interaction, yet the former only has anonymous individuals and the latter a complete lack of people. Of course, visions can only do so much, but in their 'bricks and mortar' focus they are somewhat

passive and impersonal, rather than active and interconnected: we know what the future may look like, but not how it may work through meaningful social relationships between self and other. For instance, how will the self exist and operate within the future? What opportunities for interaction will there be? What forms of interaction will take place? Who will interact with whom and where? The absence of any sense of how a vision will work, as a social reality, implies that envisioning is more about creating an ideal, future landscape, than it is about creating an ideal, living world.

The paradoxical result, therefore, is a series of highly similar, de-personalised visions that make it difficult to sustain the idea of envisioning as an empowering process in which we imagine a future that is personal and local. Instead, it appears as though envisioning involves the individual in perpetuating pre-existing motifs of the future, which work not to reveal the self, but rather, to participate in its effacement. The absence of the self may owe, in part, to our educational tradition as a whole, which Barnett and Coate argue, places little emphasis on recognising or giving meaning to the self-awareness, identity and knowledge of the student [25]. Thus, to ask students to envision *their* ideal future is to confront them with a pedagogical approach that is quite alien to them. As such, envisioning may well make them feel quite vulnerable and apprehensive, for we are asking them to give personal insights, to locate their learning within their own experiences and to undertake novel forms of enquiry, like drawing. Within this context, the inclination towards de-personalised and populist visions may well be a mechanism for mitigating and diffusing the sense of anxiety, vulnerability or responsibility that accompanies new ways of learning, experiencing and seeing the world [3].

How, then, do we move beyond the de-personal and the popular to make envisioning responsive to our locality and our self? Part of the solution, Tonn suggests, lies in transcending our worldviews and moving out of our horizon of expectation, for our world is the limit of our knowledge [26]. This may seem somewhat antithetical to self and locality and also somewhat impossible given our recognition of the relationship between what we know and the social discourses that shape our knowing. Yet the intimation is that we can recover the self and the locality by distancing ourselves from the popular, the conventional and the safe; it is only by moving out of our 'comfort-zone', and challenging the taken for granted ways in which we think, that we are able to envision a future that may well be discontinuous with our present, wherein different values, beliefs and meanings may prevail.

Thus, it is almost as though we have to move outside ourselves in order to discover ourselves; we have to be willing to challenge ourselves if we are to empower ourselves. It is here that we begin to question the idealistic underpinnings of an envisioning process that is structured through hope. Hope is widely regarded as core to the visualisation of alternative futures [16,17], but what if hope is itself a barrier to the visualisation of an alternative future? To look on the future only through hope averts our attention from the challenges the future presents; it encourages us to develop visions that disconnect the present from the future, with the result that envisioning becomes a discrete act, rather than a process of change in which present and future interweave. Hope acts a chimera that allows us, Maitney observes, to deny the threats of future change, dilute their significance, distance their impact and avoid having to take responsibility for them [27]. If we are to control and manage future change the suggestion is that we need to move beyond the hopeful and the positive to address the darker and more disquieting aspects of our social lives. This is not to retreat to a time of dystopian, or dispiriting visions of the future, but rather to recognise that hope is not a solitary emotion, it grows out of, and can often be a response to, our fears. Acknowledging and articulating our fears makes us aware of the frailties of our thinking; hope only takes us so far, it gives us a safe and secure sense of the future [27–29]. It is fear that jolts us to action and empowers us to make social change; it demands that we think anew, it requires us to explore new frames of understanding and to work in alternative ways. Out of our fear comes hope.

4. A future absent of fear?

Fear is absent from contemporary envisioning practices, which are structured through visions of an ideal future [4]. Yet this absence of fear owes, perhaps, to the nature, and coping strategies, of contemporary society, which Furedi argues, has experienced an explosion of risk and is now beset by a culture of fear [30]. Society has always been at risk, but in recent decades the nature of the risk has undergone profound change. In the past, fear was identified in relation to something, and held within itself, something akin to reverence [30,31]. We feared God, or we feared Mammon and what we feared, and were at risk from, was a recognisable entity. Today, as Robin observes, fear has become increasingly plastic and diffuse [32]. To talk of 'a culture of fear' is suggestive not of a fear of something, but rather a fear of everything: human experience is inherently risky.

Consequently, while we may expect and anticipate the worst possible scenarios and outcomes, society has developed coping strategies. Our social norms and behaviours have come to be shaped by caution as we seek to avoid activities, practices or processes that appear overly threatening. What results is a risk-averse society, in which our attitudes and behaviours are shaped by a desire to minimise or ignore risk and reduce or avoid fear. Envisioning as it is currently practised is complicit in this, for it discourages engagement with, and shelters the individual from, the multiple dimensions and difficulties of the future. It is as though the complexities and challenges of the future are perceived as so overwhelming that rather than engage with this, empowerment is seen to rest on distancing it, denying it and keeping the 'dangers' of the future at bay. Thus, as we see in visions 1, 2 and 3 the future is seen very much as a selective continuation of the present, wherein contemporary motifs of sustainability come together in a cohesive whole. This conceptualisation and application of envisioning creates what we term a sense of 'absent fear'; anxieties over the future are suppressed, diluted or expected as inevitable in order to create a sense of control over the present and the future.

If we turn to the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, however, fear does not need to be made absent in order to be controlled, rather, it needs to be acknowledged, for to do so, is liberating. According to Hobbes it is fear which reminds us, and makes us conscious, of what is important to us. To be fearless is distracting, it makes us take compromising risks, engage in activities that threaten our social stability and adopt complacent and inert attitudes towards the world. In contrast, if we acknowledge fear we tend to become more suspicious and circumspect, while at the same time becoming less impetuous and hasty, with the result that we are far more critical and aware of the multiple dimensions of human experience [32].

What we want to suggest, therefore, is that contemporary envisioning practice is an act of emasculation; the similarity of the student visions hints at a relinquishing of self-awareness and self-knowledge in exchange for a closing down of risk and a mitigating of fear. Fear is alienated in the creation of a sanitised future. It is only in acknowledging our fears, we argue, that it becomes possible to take control of our futures. To acknowledge our fears requires that we re-articulate envisioning as a fearful process rather than an ideational act. Envisioning is often understood as a process of change [1]; yet such semantic presentation often masks something that is little more than a taken for granted, isolated act that has little durability across space and time [4,27]. It is in moving away from the ideational towards the fearful that we can begin to recover the procedural nature of envisioning, for in acknowledging our fears we can begin to identify, clarify and even bring to fruition the future that we really want.

Our re-articulation of the envisioning process began, therefore, with a return to the students' initial vision. The students undertook their initial envisioning session in the first week of teaching. The idea was that these visions would help us introduce, frame and develop the themes, issues and topics of the module. In the second week we asked students to re-examine their visions and begin to identify *their* fears for, and about, the future. To help them do this we posed questions, such as what worries you; what are you anxious about; what issues are you most concerned about personally, locally and nationally? After students had spent some time thinking about these issues we asked them to re-envision in light of the fears *they* held about the *their* future. Such a process of reflection is, according to Beck, the only way to adapt to the explosion of risk and the associated culture of fear, as it enables us to critically investigate and transform our assumptions and presumptions [33]. To interact with our initial visions and question their motivation and ideology helps us to actualise the self, and articulate the personal, within the learning process.

In the space of a week we did not expect huge transformation in the student visions, but we did hope that by focussing on fear we would begin to open up a more personal perspective on the future. If we turn to the re-envisioning (Plates 4–6) we do begin to see a greater sense of self-discovery emerging; in vision 4, for instance, there is a growing uncertainty of present certainties as the student questions their mobility and their freedom, whereas in vision 5 we see increasing personalisation becoming present in the student's fears over their employment and housing security (Plate 5). The visions also suggest a greater sense of complexity, for unlike visions 1 and 2, visions 4, 5, and 6 are not cohesive places, rather they are juxtaposed fragments, indicating, perhaps, that the future is not a stable or known entity, but is rather a place and time under construction. There is also intimation within the re-visions that the students are grappling with how best to articulate their

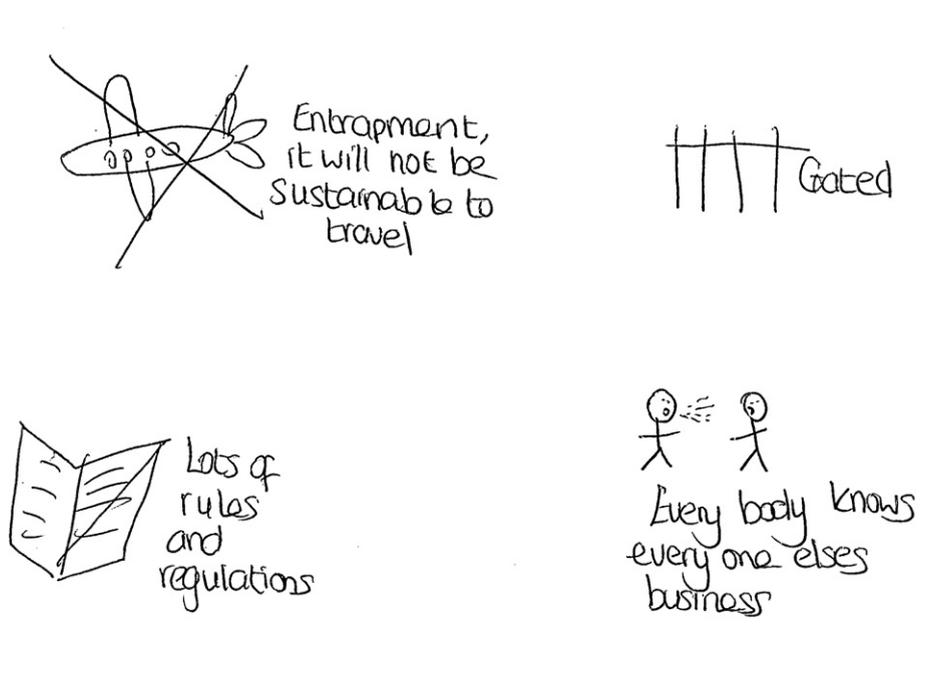


Plate 4. Student re-envisioning work.

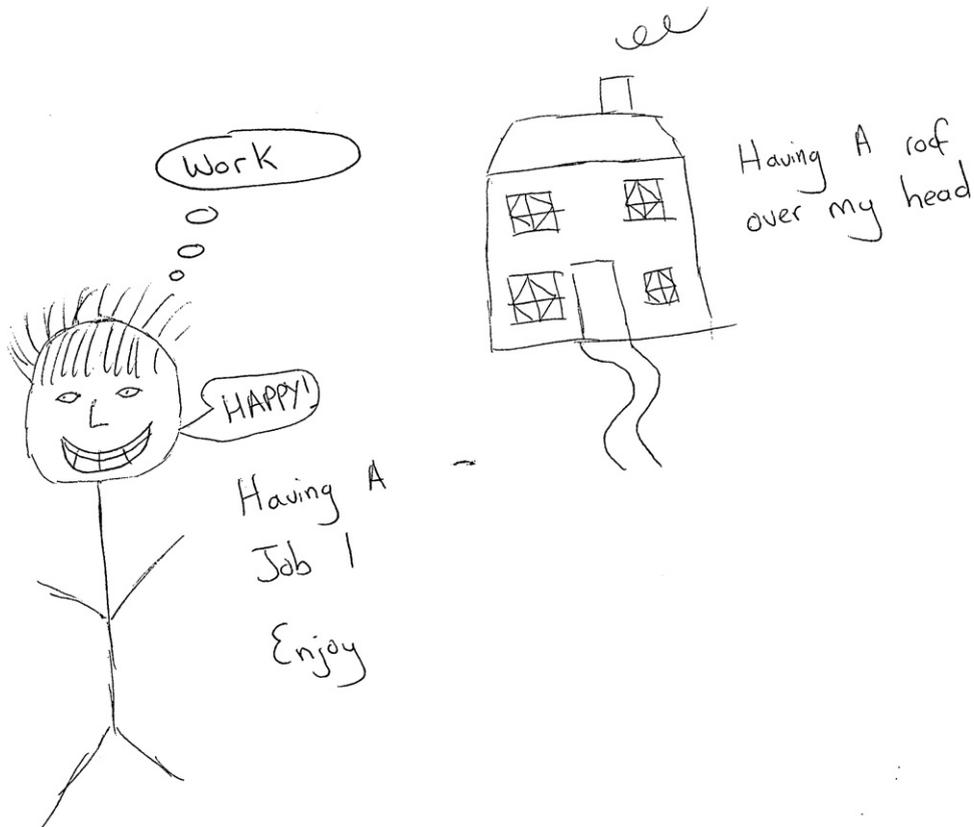


Plate 5. Student re-envisioning work.

Fear's ;

- loss of essential resources
 - trees
 - oil
- Pollution
- Run out of space to expand into
- Floods due to global warming
- Money

Plate 6. Student re-envisioning work.

fears as we see a movement from pictures to words. It is as though the future may be so different as to be beyond visualisation, or it may well be that pictures alone are too unreliable to convey a personal future; pictures have no stability across space and time, and so words are turned to in an attempt to stabilise meaning. This is evident in visions 4 and 5 where pictures and words mingle, but it is especially clear in vision 6 where words displace pictures. The turn to words over pictures hints at the difficulty of moving beyond the stereotypical to the personal, for it is here that a shared system of communication begins to break down; the visions recognise the transience of our contemporary order and acknowledge that without this it becomes harder to articulate both the intensity of their feelings and what they actually mean.

It was not only through re-personalisation that we sought to make envisioning live as a process. We also wished to re-localise it by making it real. According to Arbuthnott, education for sustainable development can never be effective unless it helps learners translate intentions into actions [13]. In this sense to create a vision is not enough, there is a need to think through how it can apply in practice. Consequently, the final part of the envisioning process was to take the students into the community surrounding the university and challenge them to address how their visions would work in practice. Drawing on

Hoskins' transition thinking, students are asked to imagine that their vision has become a reality twenty years in the future [34]. Within this future they work as guides, taking people round a community that is now an exemplar of sustainable development. In undertaking this guided walk, students are urged to think about the dimensionality of their vision and how it will create a different society – what are the vision's strengths, weakness, opportunities, barriers and threats? The intention is to get the students to realise that visions are far from simple or uncomplicated things. They are built on assumptions, beliefs, hopes and fears and drawing out these different emotions helps in the building of a realisable goal.

5. Conclusions: the urgency of change

According to van der Helm, envisioning is becoming something of an over-used, yet under-theorised practice, and this is worrying for it serves to trivialise and dilute its power and significance [4]. The problem is that envisioning is increasingly used to facilitate dreams of a different future, but dreaming is quite different from visioning, for to vision is the first stage in the transition towards the creation of a different society. It is to recognise not only what is desirable, but what is problematic, difficult, or feared and to try and move beyond these in very practical ways. To envision, then, is very much a process of change and empowerment that moves from the realm of the imagination through to the material world.

The use of envisioning techniques within the field of 'education for sustainable development' is at risk of perpetuating this trivialisation, for in its bid to engage people in futures thinking it tends to lose sight of the difficulties, complexities and procedural nature of envisioning. As a result, far from empowering individuals, envisioning can actually work to stem creative, imaginative and personal responses to the challenges of building a more sustainable future. It creates what we term a sense of 'absent fear', wherein the full range of emotions the future evokes within us, and the responses we may be capable of, are denied in the building of an optimistic vision of a future society.

Drawing on work undertaken at the University of Glamorgan this paper suggests that we need to re-position envisioning and begin to think about it as much more of a process that entails visioning, re-visioning and realisation. In this we begin to respond to van der Helm's demand for the development of greater theoretical rigour within the practice of envisioning [4]. Yet, this paper achieves this not by conceiving of envisioning in a purely abstract manner, but rather from the basis of a case study that seeks to emphasise envisioning not as a singular act, but as an on-going process of imagination, reflection and application. It is through the reflective nature of this process that empowerment of the individual becomes more achievable, for the individual becomes involved in testing, evaluating and adapting their vision in light of the realisation and development of their emotions, knowledge and understanding.

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