



Article

The Case for Treating Reframing and Imagination as Powerful Life Skills

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Abstract

Uncertainty about the future can lead to worry, anxiety, and an inability to function. In a world characterised by increasing uncertainty, these responses represent a serious problem. Imagining different future scenarios may minimise feelings of anxiety towards the future, enhancing one's ability to prepare, recover, and invent in response to change. This paper presents extracts from research on two groups in uncertain situations in life and demonstrates the value of 'reframing' and 'imagining'. Supported by studies in the field of neuropsychology, which argue that it is possible to reframe anxiety into positive resources, this study concludes that reframing and imagining should be considered powerful life skills.

Keywords

Imagination, Life Centered Design Thinking, Reframing, Life Skills, Future Scenarios.

The General Need for Imagination

Uncertainty surrounding the future may be a great threat or a great opportunity, depending on one's perspective. For many young people, the future is uncertain and disturbing. Research has revealed that almost half of young people in the UK (49%) feel anxious about their future on a daily basis, with 59% agreeing that the future seems frightening to their generation (The Prince's Trust, 2022). In contrast to thinking of the future as something to which one needs to passively adapt (Miller, 2018, Murphy, 2012), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) refers to 'futures literacy' as a human capability and skill that allows people to understand the role of the future and thereby minimise feelings of anxiety about it. In the field of neuropsychology, Suzuki argues that it is possible to reconceptualise anxiety about the future as 'a superpower' (Suzuki, 2021).

Douglas Rushkoff (2018) argues that 'the word "future" should be interpreted as a verb, not a noun', indicating an implicit view of the future as not limited to describing a place in time at which one arrives, but also the process of proactively shaping change (Prosser and Basra, 2019). There are numerous types of working with the future, such as futures thinking, foresight, strategic foresight, futures studies, and future scenarios. In all types, imagination is central. Future imaginings set a direction in people's lives; they add meaning and make sense of human existence. The notion of 'futures literacy' represents thinking and working with the future as a kind of general literacy and necessity, along the lines of data literacy, health literacy, and financial literacy. UNESCO considers futures literacy to be an essential competency for the 21st century and its increasing uncertainty. The 21st century world is facing complex and interrelated challenges, including climate change, pandemics, and economic crises (Unesco.org). These crises and the associated uncertainty are shattering conventional images of the future that have played a pivotal role in humans' ability to plan and feel secure and confident in their future. Increasing people's capability to create new images of the future is pivotal, as such images are essential in inspiring, instilling hope and confidence, and fostering the empathy and collaboration needed to (re)create a sustainable future. Indeed, Inayatullah (2008) argued that futures studies can help 'to recover [people's] agency and help them to create the world in which they wish to live'.

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Without imagination and positive images of the future, there is a risk of individual and collective despair, which is already present in many young people. Being futures literate empowers imagination and enhances people's ability to prepare, recover, and innovate as changes occur (Unesco.org). Studies of the future take place on two levels: the collective level and the individual level (Dubovicki and Dilicia, 2022). There is undoubtedly a glaring need to nurture the collective and social imagination (Greene, 1995, Mulgan, 2022). Due to mental health challenges, particularly among young people, there is also an increasing need for defining and nurturing imagination on the individual level – for example, to guide students in their everyday lives and address their concrete life challenges. This paper therefore argues that the act of reframing together with imagining should be considered powerful life skills. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), life skills are defined as

‘a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. Life skills may be directed toward personal actions or actions toward others, as well as toward actions to change the surrounding environment to make it conducive to health.’

This paper employs mixed methods research, applying a convergent research design using qualitative and quantitative data from two studies in the following contexts: 1) a voluntary three-day workshop with 95 participating journalism students at the Danish School of Media and Journalism, Feb. 2020, 50 of whom participated across all three days, and 2) a five-week course with 12 job-seeking academic professionals at the Job Centre in Frederiksberg Municipality, Oct-Nov 2022, Denmark. This paper does not present the full context of the aforementioned studies, but instead focuses on the two specific design activities ‘reframing’ and ‘imagining’, with specific attention to uncertain situations in life that typically cause worries and anxiety. Both study groups – students and graduates – represent people in a situation or period of uncertainty in life – some overwhelmed by worries or anxiety, others by hope. In the second study, the academics were faced with long-term unemployment and agreed that being unemployed is both challenging and stressful. It is well documented that even short periods of unemployment can affect one's sense of identity and the perception of one's abilities, possibilities, and value. Indeed, one research study in the UK suggests that approximately 43% of unemployed people experience stress in connection with unemployment (Wilson and Finch, 2021). In the first study, the students were competing against each other to obtain prestigious internships. The day when the internships are distributed is popularly called ‘panic day’.

Reframing and Futures Thinking in the Perspective of Uncertainty, Stress and Anxiety

Many of the positive and negative situations that humans are exposed to are out of the individual's control. Various events and situations in an individual's life (such as obtaining an internship or a job) and broader crises faced by humanity are – to a certain degree – out of the individual's control. Yet humans are capable of controlling their *reactions* to these uncertain situations. This powerful human ability is emphasised in new research in the fields of metacognitive therapy (Wells, 2011), neuroscience (Suzuki, 2021), and psychology (Stutz, 2012), where it was first introduced by Jung (2015) and his notion of ‘active imagination’. Metacognitive therapy is a form of psychotherapy ‘focused on modifying metacognitive beliefs that perpetuate states of worry, rumination and attention fixation’ (Mulder and Murray, 2017). The application of metacognitive therapy has been proven to mitigate uncertainty, stress, depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders (Wells, 2011). Simply explained, patients engaging in metacognitive therapy practice reducing the level of attention they pay to their thoughts. Instead of intensely and continuously evaluating their own thoughts about various types of worries, patients learn to practice not paying attention to their thoughts during the day and, instead, to allow themselves to pay attention during a daily ‘worrying time’.

In the field of neuroscience, Suzuki examined another related activity: changing the meaning of phenomena, situations, events, or identities. In her recent book bearing the provocative title *Anxiety is Your Superpower*, Suzuki argued that the right amount of stress channeled in the right way can confer ‘superpowers’, underlining that it is possible to transform ‘everyday anxiety’ into positive resources (Suzuki, 2012). A broad body of recent research

similarly demonstrates a radical change and reframing in the understanding of ‘stress’ (Jamieson et al, 2018, Crum, 2013, McGonigal, 2013, 2016), demonstrating the relevance of reframing not only in design projects, but also in everyday life.

Creative Design Activities as Powerful Life Skills

Suzuki (2021) was inspired by creative traits and a creative mindset in her development of the notion of ‘an activist mindset’. She argued that having a creative approach to life is pivotal because it reinforces openness, flexible thinking, and a desire to learn. Suzuki further wrote,

‘Neuroscientists are in the process of discovering that creativity is about the tension between what you can control and what you let go; it’s about being effortful and effortless; it’s about embodying the push and pull between bad and good anxiety; it’s about harnessing the arousal, activation, and engagement of anxiety while resisting the overexertion that comes from too much worry, perseveration, and overthinking of our endless what-ifs. Creativity, understanding the dimensions of its processes, will not only positively activate your capacity for creative expression but also open you up to using more of your brain than you ever thought possible’ (Suzuki, 2021, p.153).

In the history of creativity research, an important development has been the shift from a humanistic psychological understanding of creativity as a symbol of self-actualisation and human freedom (Rogers, 1954) within the sphere of individual well-being and health towards capitalist concerns with production and consumption (Glâveanu and Kaufman, 2019), which view creativity as a compulsory, goal-oriented innovation competence related to people’s work and professions (Stepper-Larsen, 2011). Likewise, there has been a movement in design research and practice away from applying the design approach to external, objective phenomena (such as societal or business challenges) and toward a more holistic understanding and application – moving from human-centred design to planet-centred or life-centred design, which aim at downgrading the Anthropocene approach and forging stronger, more holistic connections between humans, nature, and the planet. The term ‘holistic sustainability’ represents the idea that humans’ health and the health of the planet are inextricably linked (Rockefeller Foundation, unfccc.int). In this view, the external environment can be viewed as a manifestation of people’s deeply held beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions of the world – that is, their inner dimensions of sustainability. As such, people need to consistently address and reframe their existing dominant values and habits, which currently represent a significant barrier to pro-environmental behavioural change (Bejarano et al., 2019, Maiteny, 2002, Kollmus and Agyemang, 2002). In that sense ‘reframing’ is a central activity in the transition to more sustainable values and a more sustainable mindset.

From the COVID-19 crisis and growing human needs for self-care and socialisation, new research has arisen, reaffirming the view of creativity as self-actualisation (Kaufmann & Gregoire, 2016, Richards, 2007, 2019, Suzuki, 2021) and thereby calling for a new view of ‘design’ as life-centred and the development of futures literacy. Taken together, life-centred design and the development of futures literacy can be transformative (e.g., by turning everyday anxiety into a ‘superpower’; Suzuki, 2021) and can create new, motivating images of the future. As Suzuki emphasised, people with serious anxiety problems should seek professional treatment, but she also maintained that most people can greatly benefit from learning basic techniques for minimising anxiety, such as deep breathing or exercising. Moreover, Suzuki maintained that when anxiety ‘is at a manageable if not enjoyable level ... it is possible to spin it into a positive force’, enabling individuals to see a situation from a new perspective and add new meaning to situations, Suzuki described that it is possible to achieve ‘an activist mindset’ from a creative approach. In *Anxiety is Your Superpower* (2021), she emphasised the links between the personality traits and capabilities that characterise a creative person (ability to...) and those that are essential in life:

- Ability to tolerate ambiguity: *similar to becoming comfortable with difficult or painful emotions, such as anxiety.*
- Ability to persevere in the face of obstacles or failures: *nurturing an activist mindset and choosing to plough on, using feedback to try again.*

- Ability to disregard the potential for social disapproval: *a willingness to think for yourself and ask for help when you need it.*
- Ability to adopt an open attitude toward new experiences or a change in behaviour: *the essence of cognitive flexibility.*
- Ability to get out of your comfort zone and try something without a guarantee of success: *a desire to engage, learn, and enjoy an activity for the heck of it (Suzuki, 2021,176).*

The above characteristics are also central to the work of a designer. Design is a creative profession associated with a broad range of designerly activities, methods, and techniques. Design is often associated with product design as an end result. Today, however, there is increasing interest in the underlying approach and process of being a designer. For example, some thinkers are asking whether design and the designerly way of being (Cross, 2006) and approaching life can empower people to flourish in the environments in which they live, work, and play (Petermans et al. 2020, Desmet and Pohlmeier, 2013, Sørensen, 2019).

In the field of creativity research, the relationship between human health, well-being, and creativity is not new. Creativity in the perspective of identity construction is not restricted to isolated mental processes. Instead, creativity is seen as a sociocultural phenomenon and considered an essential manner of self-creation and of changing perspectives and worldviews. In the sociocultural field of creativity research, creativity is regarded as an essential resource for constructing and developing a person's identity (Barbot and Heuser, 2017, Dollinger and Dollinger, 2017, Valverde et al, 2017, Tanggaard, 2015). In this field, creativity contributes to setting one's course in life and defining one's orientation. Thus, creativity represents an essential resource in identity construction and in the development of a meaningful and sustainable life, comparable to Zittoun and Saint-Laurent's (2015) notion of 'life-creativity', which echoes both Buchanan's (1992) view of design as 'a new liberal art' and Hammershoj's concept of creativity as a question of *Bildung*. Hammershoj (2009) argues that modern *bildung* (formation) can be seen as a kind of creative process.

Design Thinking Versus Futures Thinking

Roumiantseva (2016) explained that both the design thinking process and the futures thinking process require a series of diverging and converging steps, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. On the one hand, design thinking 'ultimately converges to a concrete concept that is tested, finalized, and brought to market'. On the other hand, futures thinking 'yields a series of scenarios, which are meant to illustrate multiple options for what the future might be without defining an exact prediction'. The two concepts of thinking have different aims: whereas design thinking aims to inspire people to create, future thinking aims to inspire (Roumiantseva, 2016). To Gandhi (2021), futures thinking is 'a future-centred approach to long-term strategy - anchored in understanding the driving factors and context of different possible scenarios that could happen in future'. In Gandhi's understanding, futures thinking is focusing on macro forces, while design thinking focuses less on macro forces. In his perspective, design thinking and futures thinking are complementary to each other: 'Futures thinking paves the way for quality long-term strategy, design thinking paves the way for user-centric products and services' (Gandhi, 2021). Yet, futures thinking is not confined to studying probable futures. Joseph Voros (2017) invented the Future Cone that encompasses a row of alternative futures: potential, preposterous, possible, plausible, preferable, and 'the projected future'. Voros describes that the intention in exploring alternative future scenarios is to challenge current assumptions, stimulate thinking about complex problems and dynamics, to imagine new possibilities, and make better choices in the present or to respond to challenges in the future. This expanded view underscores that futures thinking not only considers what is likely to happen but also what could happen, what is preferred, and what could fundamentally transform existing paradigms.

DESIGN THINKING

FUTURES THINKING

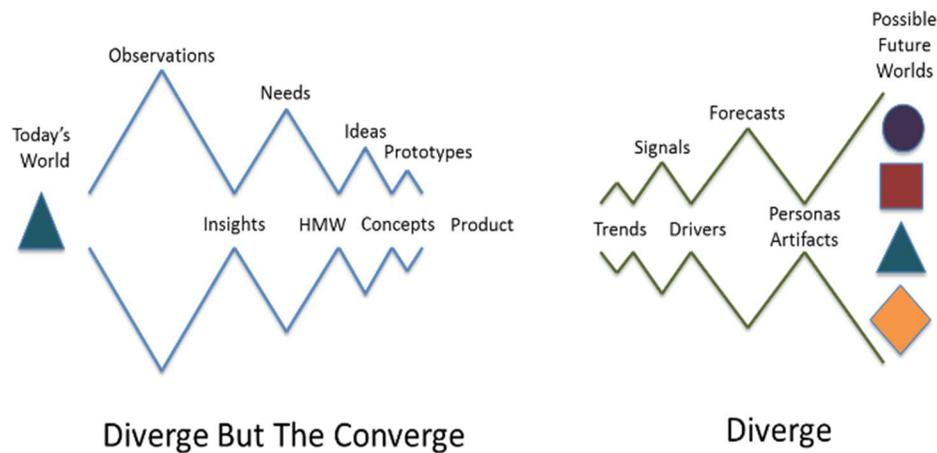


Fig. 1: Design thinking versus futures thinking (Roumiantseva, 2016)

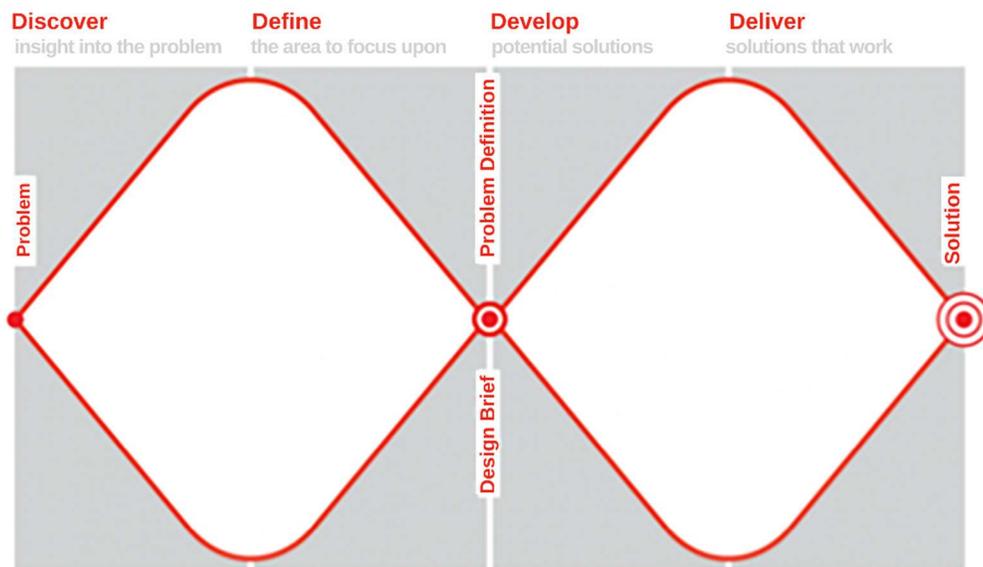


Fig. 2: The double diamond design process model (Bánáthy 1996)

The design activity ‘reframing’ as an art of futures thinking

A detailed and nuanced definition of design thinking, or the design process, is captured in the double diamond design process model by Bánáthy (1996). As Dorst (2009) argued, designers do not solve problems; they ‘reframe’ problems. The double diamond process model envisions a problem space and a solution space, accentuating the reframing of the problem in the middle of the model. Reframing is presented as the pivotal design activity that opens up a larger solution space and solutions that break with the dominant values inherent in the problem. In futures thinking, the process differs, yet it includes identifying ‘the drives’ that relate to the dominant values (ifff.org).

In the field of design research and practice, ‘reframing’ is one of the most essential design activities (Dorst 2015, Kolko, 2010, Michlewski, 2016, Sørensen, 2011). In the act of reframing problems, the designer ‘is questioning the dominant values included in the problem’ (Boland and Collopy, 2004). In short, reframing is an art of flexible thinking. Flexibility is one of the four basic functions of divergent thinking, along with elaboration, fluency, and originality (Guildford, 1967). ‘Flexible thinking’ and ‘cognitive flexibility’ relate to ‘the ability to spontaneously restructure one’s knowledge, in many ways, in adaptive response to radically changing situational demands’ (Spiro and Jeng, 1990). Cognitive flexibility is considered a higher-order thinking skill because it concerns ‘instantaneous consideration of multiple perspectives and the ability to make changes in one’s thoughts or beliefs’ (Garner, 2009 in Barak and Levenberg, 2016). Flexible thinking also involves learning to be open-minded and fair-minded and to consider alternative opinions – relating to empathy. In the field of design, flexible thinking is included in the central design activity of framing/reframing (Lawson and Dorst, 2009).

There are varying definitions and uses of the notion of reframing (Sørensen, 2011), including the following:

- Reframing is seeing things from a new perspective; it is the act of purposefully shifting the normative frame, often temporarily or in multiple directions at once (Kolko, 2010). This category also conceives of reframing as flexible thinking (Lawson and Dorst, 2009).
- Reframing can refer to a change of the meaning of products and services (cf. ‘innovation of meaning’ by Verganti, 2009).
- Reframing can be seen as ‘cognitive reframing’, which is a psychological technique for creating new meaning and value (Langer, 2009, 2016).

Reframing Uncertainty about the Future

Uncertainty about future events may lead to worry, anxiety, or even an inability to function. In a world characterised by increasing uncertainty, these responses represent a serious problem. The definition of uncertainty is ‘experiencing an unknown’, which is closely related to unpredictability, ambiguity, and unfamiliarity. Uncertainty is often associated with anxiety. In 1994, Freeston et al. defined ‘intolerance of uncertainty’ as ‘cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to uncertainty in everyday life situations’. The concept is further developed into a ‘transdiagnostic risk factor’, meaning that it is a *proposed psychological mechanism that underlies and connects* multiple forms of anxiety disorders (Gu et al., 2020). In one study of uncertainty, the researchers concluded that uncertainty fuels negative emotions, biased expectations, and inflexible responses (Gu et al., 2020). In other words, uncertainty is challenging in a world in constant flux. Thus, a common, important, and ubiquitous human feeling to reframe is ‘uncertainty’ and ‘anxiety’. The following workshops targeted participants in a situation in life that included ‘uncertainty’, which could develop into ‘anxiety’ or ‘everyday anxiety’ (Suzuki, 2021).

Research Experiments and Insights

For both groups of participants, the workshops sought to enhance knowledge about creativity and cognition, the power of values, and how values steer habitual ways of thinking and acting. Values are central to all types of change. In this sense, reframing can be considered a powerful cognitive activity, transforming the meanings, interpretations, and labels (Langer, 2009) that humans attach to phenomena, experiences, and identity. Human beings *are* values (Kirkeby, 2016). Values are often recognised in the ‘pain’ or resistance one experiences in life. The aim of the workshops in the studies addressed in this paper was to stimulate participants to reflect on and identify the values and labels underlying their experiences. Palmer introduced the notion of the ‘tragic gap’, which refers to the gap between ‘what is’ (what exists in the world) and ‘what could be’ (one’s desired future), commenting that ‘it’s like staring the void of space in the face and being brave enough to say: I’ll give it a go!’ (Suzuki, 2021, p.153). Cognitive reframing is garnering new interest due to its links to contemporary brain research about the mind-body relationship, how expectations about the future influence humans’ experiences of the future, and how human beings have the ability to rewire their brains (Langer, 2009, 2016, Schwartz, 2012, Lotto, 2017).

In both workshops, the design approach life-centred design (Sørensen, 2019) was applied as a framework for examining challenging life situations and reframing and/or creating new possibilities. In short, the aim of the concept of life-centred design is to apply a design attitude not only when solving problems in the world at large, but also when solving problems and creating possibilities in the lives of individuals. This paper focuses specifically on two life-centred design activities: ‘reframing’ and ‘imagining’. In the workshops, participants were urged to examine their dominant values and the meaning(s) they attach to the given situation, whether as job-seeking academics or students applying for an internship. Participants were subsequently encouraged to reframe and turn these values into creative resources or possibilities, similar to Suzuki’s recommendation about examining ‘anxiety triggers’ (Suzuki, 2021).

The data extracted from the two studies comprised the following: from the students, a questionnaire completed by 40 participants and 10 semi-structured interviews, and from the job-seeking academics, a questionnaire completed by participants and 10 semi-structured interviews. The focus of this paper is the two assignments on ‘imagining’ and ‘reframing’.

Assignment #1: Imagining and visualising positive and negative future scenarios

Inspired by recent work in futures studies, the workshops prompted participants to explore two or more alternative futures by conducting research and reflecting on the different potential ways to realise their visualised, desired scenarios (Dubovicki and Dilica, 2022). The participants were instructed to envision both positive and negative outcomes of their current situations (Dorst, 2015, David, 2017, Frankl, 2008).

Among the job-seeking academics, the assignment was to visualise two different future scenarios, five years ahead, one representing the best-case scenario, the other representing the worst-case scenario.

For example, one job-seeking academic imagined a worst-case future scenario in which she was still unemployed and in a depressive state of mind. The visualisation reminded her to take action in order to get a job, think in new ways, and, in particular, reframe her values and the attached meaning to her life situation. She was instructed to think of being unemployed not as a failure or as minimising her competence or her value as a human being. She explained her experience in this way:

It seemed strange in the first place, but it made good sense to visualise my worst-case scenario. It made my worries much more concrete. In this way, it is now easier to face my fear and handle it. It opens the door to working more creatively, both on developing new paths to achieving my dream scenario and new paths if my worst-case scenario comes true. In that sense, the assignment is helping to reduce my anxiety and strengthening my sense of myself; as I am sure, I can think and act creatively in both scenarios... The exercise (and the course) are strengthening my power of action. (Participant in the job-seeking academic group)

Another participant explained: *‘Visualising in particular my “worst case future scenario” was a total different way of thinking, very powerful and empowering ... it was energising to me to think of what I should not do as I now have visualised the end of that road.’* Furthermore, another participant realised how the values and meaning that she attached to ‘identity’ were exclusively dominated by her professional identity as an employee. In today’s society, there is an amalgamation of professional and personal identities, yet that combination is generally dominated by the professional identity as an employee. This domination results in the degrading reasoning: no employment, no value.

Among the students, the assignment was formulated slightly differently: to visualise three future scenarios and roads starting from ‘internship day’ to different places they could be in three years from now. The students were encouraged to use reframing to explore and create new possibilities (Sørensen, 2018). The specific future scenarios were as follows:

- Future scenario 1: You will get the internship you are dreaming about.
- Future scenario 2: You are disappointed; you will not get the internship you were dreaming about.
- Future scenario 3: You did not get any internship.

Some of the students exhibited a poor understanding of the concept of ‘reframing’: *‘The thing about making bad situations seem better, is not exactly reinventing the wheel’*. However, others discovered the complexity and possibilities of this activity. One student reflected, *‘I was surprised...I have been thinking about it, I have written about it, now I can also feel it, how I imagine the future, I would like...it gives me security.’* Another student described,

‘It was a bit challenging [to do the workshop]. I got frustrated at the fact that I had to describe myself. However, [I did learn about] the importance of identifying the problem, creating your settings, being aware of them, and the boundaries you create for yourself, plus seeing the challenges that may not even be there...’

In both workshops, envisioning a worst-case scenario resulted in deep reflections and proved to have the power to dismantle anxiety in participants. Feelings of fear or worry are typically associated with situations of uncertainty. However, facing the anxiety and identifying ‘anxiety triggers’ by exploring the underlying values and meanings and what specifically makes one anxious or stressed creates the possibility of working creatively with or reframing the situation (Suzuki, 2021).

The findings indicate three different issues. Firstly, some participants, particularly among the students, exhibited a limited understanding of reframing as ‘looking positively’ at a phenomenon. They did not comprehend the complex and nuanced reframing activity as ‘attaching a new meaning to a phenomenon’, which goes beyond merely ‘looking positively’. Secondly, creative activities were new to the participating students. And thirdly, the focus on personal values and meanings was new and challenging to some, particularly among the students. The job-seeking academics had signed up for a course with an individual focus and thus understood the premise.

Assignment #2: Reframing competencies and identities

In the second assignment, the students were instructed to reframe and describe their ‘value proposition’ (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2014), meaning the value they offer a company and/or end-user. Most people are occupied with thinking from their own perspective – what they enjoy doing and what they consider to be their competencies, such as ‘I like, and I am good at, writing newsletters’; ‘I am good at making podcasts’; or ‘I am good at writing essays’. However, it is more appropriate to think from the perspective of the company and the potential value the applicant can potentially offer that company and its end users. This shift represents an entrepreneurial way of thinking and was new and challenging for both the students and the job-seeking academics in both workshops. For example, one participant reflected,

‘Actually, I think...I tend to keep my focus “within myself”... [I will] look into what I am actually capable of and how businesses and companies can also use [these competencies] – I will really focus on that. Another participant similarly described, ‘I think it is very useful, in particular to reflect on how I add value for other people. I would like to work on that focus. I think it can be difficult to figure out how I can contribute, for example, as an intern.’

The job-seeking academics were instructed in the second assignment to conduct a reframing exercise, reframing their identity from a job-seeking academic to an entrepreneur. The participants were trained to think as though they were shop owners with different types of value propositions displayed in the shop window. This assignment gave most of the participants “a feeling of relief”, “a freedom from exposing yourself” and similar expressions. For participants whose identities were closely linked to their professional identities, it was meaningful to work with the reframing of identity. Thinking and acting as an entrepreneur separated their private and professional identities, opening new possibilities for taking chances and displaying new and different value propositions in one’s ‘shop window’: *‘The idea about being an entrepreneur having my own shop gives me more courage; also it forces me to think more concrete on what kind of value I actually can offer into a company’*. One participant even decided to publish her ‘shop’ on LinkedIn, presenting the value propositions she could offer a company. She garnered substantial attention from viewers and was soon offered two different positions. This participant reported that she observed a conclusive change in her new positive and empowering energy as a result of taking action instead of

passively waiting for a positive answer on her applications.

Conclusions from the Experimental Workshops

The students shared diverse assessments of their workshop experience. Approximately 45% of the students expressed the opinion that the approach was irrelevant/absolutely irrelevant, while approximately 55% expressed that they found it empowering. One student shared,

‘Many [of the other peers] were very critical of the course, but for me (who was nervous about the internship application and the stress that follows) it was very rewarding. Many of the tools [teacher’s name] mentioned and the things we worked with helped a lot. [The tools] gave me more peace and a belief in myself. I was very happy with the course...’

In contrast, another student assessed, ‘...Call it creativity, reframing, a new mindset, or whatever; in my eyes, this is not at all useful in order to prepare for an internship. It’s a waste of time and resources’.

Meanwhile, among the job-seeking academics, 90% of respondents reported that the approach was empowering. There are various possible explanations for the negative response among the journalism students, who were attending a creative and designerly class on ‘preparation for internship’. The negative response might relate to a) a lack of reconciliation of expectations or b) values and preconceptions of futures thinking and creativity. Another study at the same institution revealed positive outcomes from creative activities and visualisation, yet the majority of the participating journalism students considered ‘creativity’ to be an ‘unserious activity’ and a ‘waste of time’ (Stentoft and Sørensen, 2019).

Eighty percent of the job-seeking academics reported that they ‘gained more power of action’, and 80% ‘gained more desire and faith in the future’. In addition, 89% stated that the course made them capable of ‘seeing their work life in new ways’. Moreover, 50% had started a new job (3)/job with a wage subsidy (3) within six weeks after completion of the course.

The Experiments Through The Lens of Transformative Learning

In a world of constant change, there is continuous discussion on types of knowledge, competencies, and qualities relevant for present and future students. To learning experts, the most important competency is learning to learn, and to unlearn and relearn (Grant, 2021). Substantiated by several studies, Lucas and Claxton (2009) argue that the health of individuals, communities, and societies depends on their encouragement of learning. People live and age better and are better at relating to change when they have the opportunity and desire to learn. ‘People who are used to learning and skilled at it, are less likely to be caught on the hop when circumstances change. They are more ready to rise to the challenge...’ (Lucas & Claxton, 2009).

Among the different paradigms in learning, the behaviouristic view of learning is rooted in industrial society. In contrast, the learning described by Lucas and Claxton (2009) and transformative learning described by Illeris (2014) and Mezirow (1996) reflect the constructivist perspective, where learners continuously interpret their sense of existence to create meaning or develop alternative views. Explaining transformative learning theory, Mezirow (1996, p.162) wrote, ‘Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action’. Transformative learning is highly relevant in a society in constant change; it can help to broaden perspectives, adapt outdated values and beliefs, and foster rethinking and unlearning. One often thinks of intelligence as the ability to think and learn, but in an increasingly complex and changing world, the ability to rethink and unlearn is even more important (Grant, 2021).

Transformative learning is ‘the expansion of consciousness through which an individual can question themselves about their own feelings, beliefs, assumptions, and perspective on their purpose. Individuals who are undergoing transformative learning completely rewire and transform their beliefs, assumptions, and experiences into new perspectives on the self or the problem at hand’ (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow (1997) described four main stages of the transformational learning process. In the first two stages, the learner engages in an individual, private ‘disorienting dilemma’ (e.g., a person applying for an internship/job is automatically put into a locked situation,

passively awaiting judgement). This dilemma was aptly captured by one job-seeking academic: ‘It is the passivity, awaiting managers judgement that is killing motivation and slowly eating ones self-esteem.’

In the ‘self-reflective debrief process’ in the second phase, the learner might experience cognitive dissonance between their long-held values and beliefs (e.g., ‘Being a student/job-seeking academic leaves me with a feeling of uncertainty, and this uncertainty makes me more or less anxious despite how successful I feel as a successful student/academic’). In the third phase, the learner identifies strategies for experimenting with a new role (e.g., ‘Managers’ or others’ positive or negative evaluations of me cannot change my competencies, my personality, or my value as a human being’). Job-seeking academics experimented with a new role as proactive entrepreneurs who think creatively, take action, and create new possibilities.

In the final stage, learners experience reintegration as they become conscious of their new or reframed values (e.g., ‘Having positive/negative feedback from potential managers is an opportunity for learning’).

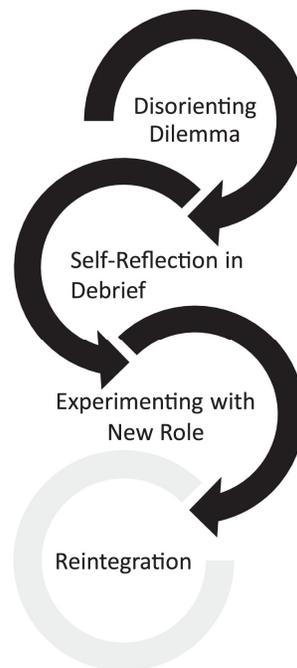


Fig. 3: Overview of the four main stages of the transformational learning process, adapted from Mezirow (1997).

Conclusion

This paper presents extracts from two studies of participants facing uncertain situations in life that may cause worries and anxiety: one group of journalism students focused on securing internships, another group of job-seeking academics focused on obtaining or creating jobs. This paper affirms the power and possibility of reframing, a creative design activity that involves the ability to reframe uncertain situations and related worries into possibilities. Also, the two examined studies included imagining different types of future scenarios. Both studies were small in scope, and one consisted of participants who tend to have barriers to creative processes. Nevertheless, in line with other research in the fields of creativity (Barbot and Heuser, 2017, Dollinger and Dollinger, 2017, Zittoun and Saint-Laurent, 2015), psychology (Jung, 2015, Frankl, 1946, Stutz, 2012) and neuroscience (Suzuki, 2021), the findings highlight the transformative role of creativity and designerly activities, through which it is possible to reframe worries and even anxiety into a ‘superpower’ (Suzuki, 2021).

This paper also draws attention to the potential for popularising reframing and futures thinking (Poussa, 2021) in a manner that is not limited to design education, but rather applies to all types of education. Some forms of education may be characterised as training ‘reality discoverers’ (presumably represented in this research by the

participating journalism students) and others as training ‘possibility thinkers’ (Kaufman and Gregoire, 2016). However, all students need to think about and practice futures thinking because it creates a sense of hope and a springboard for agency and action, ‘sparking the individual and collective transformation required to not only prevent ongoing harm but to create regenerative, thriving futures for all’ (Camrass, 2022). As Suzuki claimed, ‘every challenging, even tragic, anxiety-filled situation can be a launchpad for creativity’ (Suzuki, 2021, 188).

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