

Article

A New Approach for Teaching and Learning Sustainability: Futures Studies Meet International Business

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Against the backdrop of an uncertain and complex international environment that grand challenges, such as rising inequalities, climate change, and infectious diseases, have shaped, educators must be able to prepare students to be capable of tackling a multitude of upcoming global issues. Anticipatory competencies (i.e., futures literacy) could be key to navigating these multiple seas of uncertainty. Moreover, understanding the potential of futures studies and applying it to international business could help our fellow educators to equip students to navigate uncharted territories, bringing creativity and imagination to the IB classroom.

INTRODUCTION: FUTURES STUDIES, SUSTAINABILITY, AND INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

The 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) reinforced the idea that driving a paradigm shift toward global sustainability requires urgent action. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the United Nations published in 2015 are all evidently intertwined, unsurprisingly so as we find ourselves in environments that complex problems characterize. Echoing this message, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has shown the interrelatedness among critical global risks in its annual *Global Risks Report*, emphasizing the need for new professional skills to overcome them (World Economic Forum, 2022). Thus, while incorporating sustainability in higher education is urgent, tackling these problems requires us to “unlearn” and re-think some seemingly best practices. This concerns scholars and practitioners in the field of International Business (IB), who need to develop suitable skills for the possible futures ahead (Berg, 2020). In this paper, we refer to the plural “futures” because multiple potential future pathways and trajectories are open for exploration. Decision-makers might consider these alternative scenarios or visions of the future as an exercise in dealing with uncertainty through anticipation.

Currently, methodologies stemming from futures studies primarily involve scenario planning and foresight, complementing strategic management tools. Despite tentative attempts to bridge IB and futures studies (Roberts & Fuller, 2010), we see even greater potential for teaching and learn-

ing in the usually disregarded component of futures studies that goes beyond strategic foresight. *Anticipation* embraces uncertainty by exploring and creating out-of-the-box solutions (Poli, 2019). Being futures-literate involves fostering imagination, spontaneity, and improvisation, making sense of emergent complexity to enhance our ability to prepare, adapt, recover, and recreate against the backdrop of continuous change. We want to address the imbalance among futures methods by sharing the action-learning potential of futures literacy laboratories (FLL) with sustainability-focused IB educators.

FUTURES LITERACY AND FUTURES LABS

To ensure (but, first, imagine!) sustainable development as one possible future that benefits all, UNESCO has identified a set of competencies that higher education should foster (Leicht, Heiss, & Byun, 2018). Within these competency frameworks, anticipatory competencies – i.e., futures literacy – are among those we suggest addressing.

Educators can use different methodologies, including *futures literacy laboratories (FLL)* (see [Figure 1](#) and [Table 1](#)), which show various application possibilities and transformation potentials for sustainability in IB and beyond (Miller, 2018a). For example, some researchers and educators have explored similarities between the methodologies of design thinking and futures literacy (laboratories), approaching design thinking in different phases (i.e., reframing the initial problem, research, analysis, synthesis, realization) (Cagnin, 2018).

The overall goal of FLLs is to bring anticipatory assumptions to the forefront, spark reflection and imagination,

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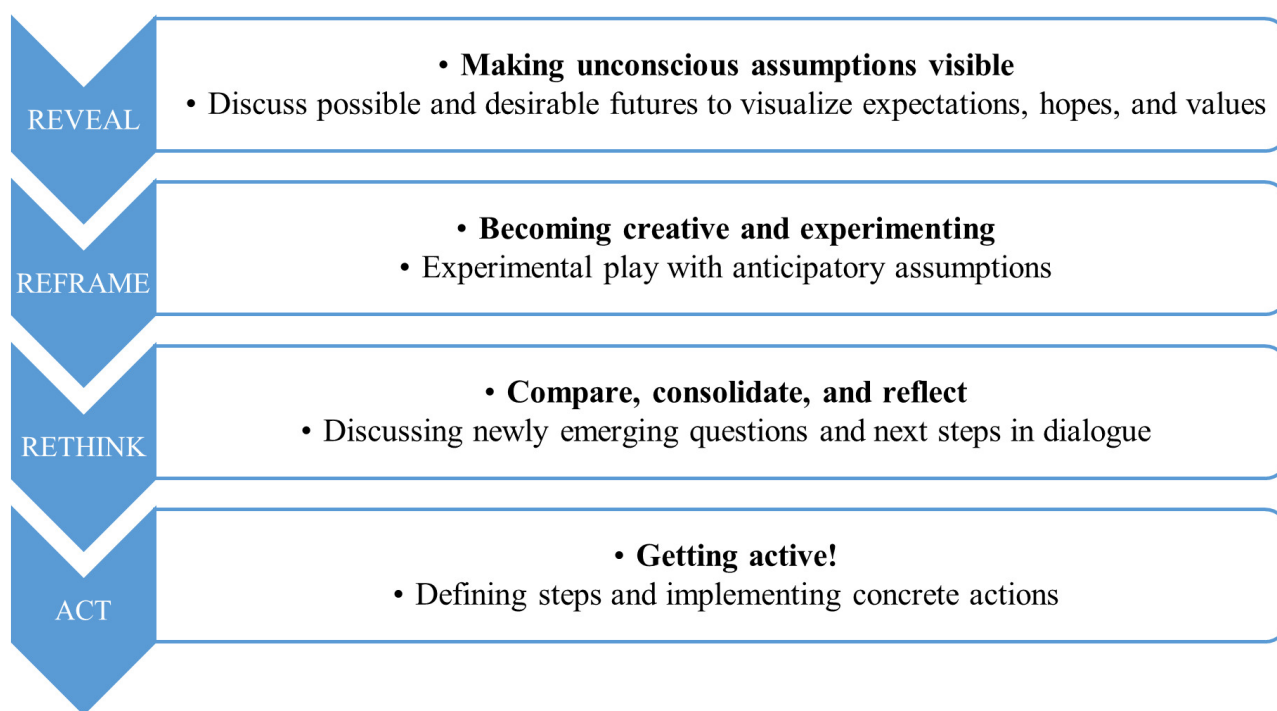


Figure 1. Four phases of Futures Literacy Laboratories (FLL)

Source: Own illustration

and inspire people to ask “new” questions, enabling them to “use the future” and improve their futures literacy. Enabling people to “use the future” calls for encouraging participants of FLLs to reveal and reflect on their worldviews (i.e., anticipatory assumptions), to truly understand how they shape the futures they (can) imagine. Participants can share the output they generate during all four phases and make it visible in a workshop format, using such means as pinboards.

For educators not yet experienced with futures literacy, we have selected publications that might provide a good starting point for understanding it (Berghem, 2021; Häggström & Schmidt, 2021; Miller, 2018a).

Based on the work of Miller (2018b), we describe the FLL phases in more detail below and provide practical guidance for educators (see last column in [Table 1](#) for detailed in-class instructions).

PHASE 1: REVEAL

In the first phase, educators should choose exercises that can make tacit knowledge explicit through a joint sharing process within (usually small break-out) groups. The educators invite participants to share their expectations, fears, and hopes about their respective futures. While educators may start with the more cognitively led participants’ predictions about (probable) futures, one core aspect is catering to the emotional side, by discussing hopes regarding *desirable* futures. One goal is to put participants in a critical reflective state about their “routine actions” and worldviews, enabling them to see that their assumptions are powerful in shaping their hopes. Additionally, they will realize that their imaginary capabilities and pictures of fu-

tures depend on narratives and framings, which they will be able to understand, question, and navigate more clearly with advanced futures literacy. To avoid easy predictions, educators should ask participants to consider a year reasonably far in the future (e.g., 2035). At this stage, finding a consensus among participants’ futures is not necessary; rather, participants should embrace the diversity and richness of different visions. An educator’s challenge during this phase is to prevent participants from discussing which futures are likely or (in)correct, or how to get from the present to the articulated future.

After discussing probable futures, educators may want to make use of meditation or mind journey exercises to facilitate thinking about *desirable* futures. Educators can facilitate participant engagement and commitment by encouraging participants to speak in the present tense, to foster a deeper connection to their envisioned future. Additionally, by balancing individual and group work, educators can ensure that participants stay committed and share their perspectives, instead of having a few students steering the conversation and imposing their views.

PHASE 2: REFRAME

The second phase is creative, inventive, and experimental – and also difficult and challenging, as participants may lack experience in “using the future.” Most people cannot envision the future without adopting probabilistic framings. Thus, this phase aims to present different and thought-provoking anticipatory assumptions, without negatively disrupting participants’ former assumptions by exposing them to a future that is neither probable nor necessarily desirable. For example, having discussed probable and desirable

Table 1. Methodological approaches and tools

FLL Phase	What is important when structuring the phase?	Aim	Potential methods/tools	Possible questions/assignments ¹
Phase 1: Reveal	- Make diverse images of the future visible - Consensus is not necessary - No right or wrong—nobody knows the future - Use words that appeal to predictive thinking (e.g., “what do you expect / what would you bet your money on?”) - Stimulate participants’ wishful and imaginative thinking through meditation/mind journeys	Exploring probable and desirable futures - Connecting to participants and topic - Activating imagination and seeing barriers - Visualizing futures and their different anticipatory assumptions	- Visualizing futures with drawings/pictures - Journey of the mind - Trend and risk reports; megatrend maps - Systems mapping (Iceberg model, causal loops, connected circles) - Stakeholder mapping - Futures wheel	Probable Futures (40 mins) Individual writing: Record on text cards what you expect to happen in 2035 regarding management in organizations. Formulate in the present tense. Joint discussion: Share the elements in the group one by one. Sort, deepen, and add to them. Selection: Agree on five cards that should be taken to the common “harvest” for a probable future of management in organizations. Choose a presenter who explains your shared probable future. Present in the plenary: Share your results with the other groups. Desirable Futures (30 mins) [Educator shares mind journey / meditation, 15 mins] Share and create a collage/mashup: Tell each other about the images you have seen on the journey to your desirable futures. Using drawings / pictures, emojis, or bullet points, create a collage that depicts your group’s desirable futures on text cards. Present in the plenary: Share your results with the other groups.
Phase 2: Reframe	- Different from futures shared in Phase 1 - Avoid usage of dystopias as emotional triggers - Balance between demanding too much vs. too little	Experimenting with challenging, new, and thought-provoking futures - Strengthening imagination - Breaking out of old and familiar thinking - Broadening horizon - Practicing dealing with the unfamiliar - Creativity catalyst - Enabling the emergence of new assumptions	- Improvisation methods - LEGO® Serious Play® - Gamification (Thing from the Future, Sarkar Game, Future Game 2050) - Roleplay - Scenario methods - Causal Layered Analysis - Walt Disney Method - Science fiction stories	Alternative Futures (50–90 mins) <i>New assumption: In 2040, people have a great perceptiveness toward themselves, the environment, and the global economy. The absence of money and competitiveness characterize the economy itself.</i> “In 2040, Toni wakes up in the morning and starts a new working day. After a fresh coffee, he / she checks the agenda for the current day ...” Improvise a story of this alternative future by considering the new setting/assumption above. Together in group, you will improvise a story about Toni’s working day in this alternative future of management in organizations in 2035. In each group, one person will start with the suggested sentence, then the next person will continue with a sentence or a few words. Go in turns and build the story together. Be spontaneous and quick. Tell the first thing that comes to mind. Do not write anything down. Have fun! What does management look like in this alternative future? Record your group ideas on text cards / post-its. Formulate bullet points or sentences and draw pictures. Please do not discuss whether this future is likely or desirable, but fill it with details. There is no right or wrong! Present in the plenary: Share your results with the other groups.

FLL Phase	What is important when structuring the phase?	Aim	Potential methods/tools	Possible questions/assignments ¹
Phase 3: Rethink	- Facilitators should ensure a slow transition - Bring all collective input from Phases 1–2 back into room (e.g., via pinboards)	Comparing futures and finding new, emerging questions use this openness to see new things	- Reflective journaling - Open discussions	<u>Powerful new questions</u> (50–90 mins) Take two text cards, walk through our collection of futures, and write your questions down. Please indicate your name in the lower right corner. - What questions come up? What is still open? - What do you find exciting? - What would you most like to deal with right now? Share your questions in plenary—no explanation necessary. - Are there connections between questions? Assign your own question to similar ones on the pinboard.
Phase 4: Act	- Participants choose or prioritize after creativity, openness, and diversity in Phase 2 - Discuss implementation challenges of new ideas (e.g., hierarchies, silos)	Realizing and implementing futures by producing tangible and presentable results: "What came out? / What was the result?"	- Backcasting / Roadmapping - Mind-mapping and clustering of ideas - Task lists and working groups - Networking - Research questions - Scenario technique - Future personas - Prototyping	<u>Ideas for action</u> (50–90 mins) Working with powerful questions: Choose individually a cluster of questions. - What is this cluster about? - What connects the individual questions? - Do new ideas for action emerge? Use respective tools (e.g., backcasting, prototyping) to realize your vision.

¹These instructions were part of a Futures Literacy Laboratory conducted in September 2022, on the topic "Futures of Management in Organizations." Further material and exercises can be found by downloading the supplement material attached to the online version of this article.

Source: Own illustration

futures of organizational management in Phase 1, Phase 2 could introduce the following assumption: “In 2035, people have considerable perceptiveness toward themselves, the environment, and the global economy, which the absence of money and competitiveness characterizes.” By exposing participants to unfamiliar assumptions (e.g., absence of money and competitiveness), educators create settings that significantly differ from those participants shared in Phase 1. Educators can create alternative assumptions by taking something away (schools, hierarchy, money), adding something new, or reversing (money/no money) the focus. The assumptions and settings of these alternative futures should neither overwhelm nor underchallenge participants.

PHASE 3: RETHINK

Here, participants compare and contrast, reflect, and consolidate the different futures to which Phases 1 and 2 have exposed them. As participants have gained some distance from their traditional and tacit framing, they can start to engage with alternative framings by developing new questions. Educators ask participants to reconsider what they discussed during Phases 1 and 2 and reflect on such questions as: “What (additional) questions arise? What is still open? What do you find exciting? What would you most like to deal with right now?”

Having participants walk through the classroom (or virtual space) with their previous insights and ideas of Phase 1 and 2 on display (e.g., pinboards), allowing them to identify parts of the conversation that mattered most to them and questions that remain, can enhance commitment and engagement.

PHASE 4: ACT

While Phases 1–3 are imaginative and creative, educators now challenge participants to realize their imagined futures by producing actionable steps, through such devices as backcasting exercises. These suggest starting with your goal and working backward in steps, to understand what you must do in the present. This phase should empower participants to become actively involved in shaping their futures.

Educators should ensure that the energy Phases 1–3 created is translating into actionable items, giving participants a positive spirit of being capable of driving change. Participants likely will see many constraints within the systems in which they operate (e.g., hierarchies, silo-thinking), making seeing potential leverage points for change a challenge.

ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS: OUTLINING POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN IB

To educate future leaders and develop “futures literacy” competence, educators can utilize FLL in combination with various IB topics. Futures literacy can enhance business and education in many areas, such as transformative business strategies (Cagnin, 2018) and disaster preparedness (Hoffmann & Muttarak, 2017). FLL phases provide opportunities for a broader perspective on sustainability, by mov-

ing beyond traditional paradigms, revisiting and analyzing proposed futures using new insights, and designing realistic action plans. This should enhance students’ abstract thinking and critical analytical capabilities, valuable competencies for IB professionals (Berg, 2020).

Futures studies are interdisciplinary. Along with the four phases, educators can invite students to develop their respective futures for specific sectors (e.g., tourism, fashion, food, mobility). Navigating through these phases provides students with ideas to create compelling narratives for sustainable business development, by experiencing exercises based on such methods as trends analysis, foresight, scenario planning, backcasting, and prototyping. Throughout the four phases, educators can use various innovative methods and approaches (e.g., improv theater, LEGO® Serious Play®, design thinking).

Finally, generating a friendly and safe space for classroom discussion is instrumental in students freely contributing, considering that the first three stages rely on participants’ openness and willingness to experiment. IB educators should reconfigure their usual practices and incorporate critical perspectives in their topics, ask thought-provoking questions, and work with colleagues from other disciplines to promote an environment for creativity and provide space for diverse discussions.

CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates the links between futures studies approaches and a sustainability-oriented IB education, to develop narratives with the potential to unleash our imagination to find out-of-the-box solutions. We offer this cross-disciplinary excursion because we believe that traditional teaching and learning approaches have serious limitations in training future leaders who face complex global issues, for whom actionable understanding is of the utmost importance in the IB field.

The interactive learning environment makes futures thinking attractive to students and allows educational institutions to respond to SDG 4 (Quality of education), with the potential for introducing sustainable futures perspectives into business and management education. If students learn how to navigate global ecosystems, rather than thinking in isolated processes, their solutions may have greater potential to tackle the complex problems and grand challenges of our time. Introducing such futures-studies approaches as FLL to IB classrooms would reflect a comprehensive understanding of societies’ complex and ambiguous interrelations, promoting anticipation-oriented decision-making while developing critical thinking and stimulating students’ imaginations.

Fostering futures literacy provides new features for analyzing IB-related topics, including considering impacts on a system’s stakeholders, designing preventive policies and measures, navigating negative future trade-offs, promoting a reinforced compliance culture, and building a sustainable and regenerative environment for businesses.

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