

Nova, N. 2023. *From Field Research to Design Fiction: From Clarifying the Present, to Designing the Future*, in Daniel Fischer, Marlyne Sahakian, Jordan King, Jen Dyer, Gill Seyfang (eds), *Teaching and Learning Sustainable Consumption A Guidebook*, Routledge, pp. 322-326

54 From field research to design fiction: from clarifying the present, to designing the future

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Group size	Level	Duration
S	G	Multiple sessions

This activity uses a “design fiction” approach to engage students with ways to extend product life-cycles and help them develop design-thinking skills.

Fact box

Tags	<p>Thematic focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Design fiction ● Futures thinking <p>Competencies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding complexity/systems thinking ● Grappling with tradeoffs/what is valued ● Futures thinking/visioning ● Working as a team/collaborating ● Planning for change/strategic thinking
Aims/objectives	The main aim is for students to learn how to do field research and observe the world, to then draw on their observations to design future scenarios.

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<p>How it works/methods</p>	<p>Students start with a workshop brief about some kind of change underway in society, which involves a general context plus a problem statement about the increasing importance of smartphone repair practices (independent shops, repair cafés, hackerspaces, etc.) and how to support them in the near future. Students have a week to do interviews and observations, to understand the problem more deeply, and to identify potential signals of change. Students are also encouraged to look into documents and archives, or other research projects and the general press. In a second phase, these observations are then applied to addressing the problem in its different dimensions, accounting for: the way people talk about technologies; the activities that people do, the gestures, and bodily engagements; the materiality of technologies; and, of course, the related energy usage, which is often rendered invisible. This serves to highlight frictions, tensions, problems, emotional perspectives, and so on.</p> <p>The third phase consists in using the material the students have collected to craft props, that is, fictional artifacts that evoke future scenarios, an approach called Design Fiction (Bleecker et al., 2022). Students brainstorm how their observations may lead to new services or social situations in the future, which quickly produce tangible manifestations: fake packaging, photomontage, fictional ads, etc. In this second week, the focus is on showing how changes may unfold in the near future. Students are required to produce a video, including storyboarding, shooting, and editing. The video is supposed to show how the services they envisioned would be used practically, and what kind of consequences they may lead to (solving some issues, fostering new frictions, etc.). Students are asked to use an ironic tone in their projects to highlight the pros and cons of the situations they imagined.</p> <p>In the third phase, students must evaluate the plausibility of their proposed solution. In this respect, students are asked to work around certain limits – recognizing that resources are not always abundant – and that sometimes one must make do with what one has. For instance, they are asked to discuss whether the ideas they envisioned are probable, relevant, or</p>
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Assessment	<p>Students receive qualitative feedback throughout the process and a final grade. Formative feedback is based on (1) connecting between the fiction they produced and the observation they made, (2) between the format they chose and the argument they make, and (3) the originality of the idea and its relevance. The idea should be plausible, from a social and technological perspective.</p> <p>Each group presents its work in front of the class. Students' projects are evaluated using four criteria: originality of their project ideas (with regards to similar services that already exist), the relevance of project ideas (with regards to observations made in the field research phase), the plausibility of the future scenarios, and the quality of group presentation.</p>
Size of group/adapted to	<p>10–16 students working in groups of 2–3. Can be adapted to larger classes, as long as the group size remains small.</p>
Format	<p>Minimum 1 week, full-time; ideally 2–3 weeks. With 3 weeks, you can go back to the informants and discuss the future scenarios with them, or do a literature review beforehand.</p> <p>If needed, the timing can be spread over several weeks.</p>
Level	<p>Master's</p>
What you need/ preparation	<p>Computers, graphic design software, prototyping tools (printers), video cameras, microphone, A/V editing software.</p> <p>A big room to share findings.</p> <p>Doing the class entirely online would not be recommended, as it requires fieldwork and the actual production of artifacts, as well as video shooting.</p>

Activity snapshot

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The pictures presented in Figures 54.1 and 54.2 are taken from the workshop project Tarophonology, a well-being kit for your smartphone, by Guillaume Humbert and Azaee Bougard-Legrrix.

One sometimes hears different advice and recommendations on how to maintain, repair, or use one's smartphone in repair shops and on the internet. These tips and different ideas that circulate in these places sometimes seem strange and this is due to the lack of technical explanation or explicit references. For example, one often hears that one should soak one's phone in rice when the device has been submerged in water. But why?

After identifying a number of these beliefs, the group came up with a wellness kit – in the form of tarot cards and ritual objects – that would allow them to take care of their phone on a daily basis.

A little bit more detail...

Why I came up with this example and what it is about

The workshop combines discussion and practical activities to engage students in learning as a practice. Sometimes, theoretical frameworks and concepts are given (coming from Anthropology or Science and Technology Studies, e.g., recognizing the agency of technology), but the main aim is to gain an introduction to a certain practice over a very short period of time, and to build a toolbox for inquiry, as well as learn the crafts associated with fieldwork.

Students also deal with the notion of subjectivity, and the need for problems to be situated (i.e., to ground projects into a local context with all of its peculiarities). For instance, repair shops in Geneva are often owned/operated by people coming from North-Africa and France who all seem to know each other and work as a loose kind of network to share documents, information, or phone parts. An understanding of this context is essential, as part of the fieldwork experience and results. This emphasis on fieldwork is based on the idea that designers need to build their own approach to design over time and in close contact with the field.

Among the tools of the trade, students learn about observation and scenario development. It is, however, hard to push them to not just be in a posture of optimization and problem solving, but more in an observatory posture. For example, more sustainable consumption solutions are not always about the latest energy-saving technology.

What challenges and insights I can share

It is important to choose a topic that is accessible and motivating for the students, in terms of field research. They have to go talk to people they have never met, so they need to be motivated! They also must be able to observe.

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In designing future fictions, students in this program have been trained to deviate from the norm – the props they create need to create some kind of debate, so the props need to be provocative. The futures need not be utopic, they can be cautionary tales – terrible things that we don't necessarily want to happen (for an inspiring manual on design fiction, see Bleecker et al., 2022).

What context it is being given in

The activity was implemented in a Master's program in Media and Interaction Design (M.A.) at Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD – Genève, HES-SO) in Switzerland.



Figure 54.1 A tarot-like card deck that suggests smartphone users new rituals to make their device last longer (source: Workshop at ENSCI – Les Ateliers by Anaïs Bloch and Nicolas Nova, Tarophonologie, a project by Guillaume Humbert and Azaee Bougard-Legrix, 2018)



Figure 54.2 A set of tools to test various problems smartphones may have (source: Workshop at ENSCI – Les Ateliers by Anaïs Bloch and Nicolas Nova, Tarophonologie, a project by Guillaume Humbert and Azaee Bougardlegrix, 2018)

Reference

Bleecker, J., Foster, N., Girardin, F., & Nova, N. (2022). *The Manual of Design Fiction*. Near Future Laboratory Press.