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From Utopia to sustainable entrepreneurship: a novel case methodology

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable entrepreneurship education (SEE) is a promising means to teach students to undertake action to move towards sustainability (Rashid, 2019; Strachan, 2018). Thus, there is a need for a portfolio of teaching methods and tools designed for SEE (Hermann & Bossle, 2020). Live case—that is, a case that builds on actual, current, and novel situations for organizations (see Chapters 1 and 3)—has been used in both entrepreneurship (Rauch & Hulsink, 2015) and sustainability education (Hardin et al., 2016) and is regarded as a promising method to teach entrepreneurship for sustainable development at higher education institutions (Hermann & Bossle, 2020; Mindt & Rieckmann, 2017). However, it is not yet understood how live cases can be utilized to teach sustainable entrepreneurship (Hermann & Bossle, 2020).

In this chapter, we present our newly developed utopia-realizing methodology as an example of how to integrate elements from sustainability and entrepreneurship education using the live case method. While traditionally the case owner and the problems/challenges the case builds on are introduced as a first stage of the case activities (see Chapter 1), utopia realizing is designed so that the students first engage in a wishful-thinking scenario of the case context (i.e. utopia)—for example, the industry in a region—before the case is introduced.

The live case method allows us to switch between times and to incorporate future-oriented elements into the past and present through the case narrative and activities. Thus, the live case method is suitable to teach sustainable entrepreneurship since both entrepreneurship and sustainability are future-oriented concepts focusing on changing the future (Dean & McMullen, 2007). Sustainability is about envisioning a better future and provides boundaries and prerequisites for the values to be created through entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship is about acting on opportunities to create future value for others (i.e. entrepreneurship is a means for change).

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF UTOPIA REALIZING: A LIVE CASE-BASED METHODOLOGY

To act entrepreneurially for a better future, students need to train their foresight thinking and their normative competences, and their entrepreneurial skills and competences (Lans et al., 2014). Therefore, we have designed a live case methodology that incorporates Levitas's (2013) utopia as a method concept, allowing the students to more freely describe their utopia of a sustainable future before they are presented with the narrative of a live case to pursue and realize an opportunity that fits their utopia. Hence, the visionary and normative aspects of sustainability and the craft of entrepreneurial action to pursue and realize opportunities are combined in the utopia-realizing methodology.

Utopia realizing combines elements from entrepreneurship and sustainability teaching methods through the live case method. The live case method is utilized so it accounts for the underpinning ideas of (1) utopia as a method to address the normativity of sustainability (Levitas, 2013), (2) system-thinking principles and the complexity of working with a live case from the real world (Lans et al., 2014), and (3) a design-thinking-inspired process of case activities to increase students' entrepreneurial mindset and skills (Daniel, 2016; Dhliwayo, 2008). In the following, we discuss each of these three underpinnings of the utopia-realizing methodology.

Utopia as a Method to Address the Normativity of Sustainability

Utopia has been on the political agenda since the environmental awakening in the 1960s and is an established teaching methodology in future studies and sustainability studies (Hedrén, 2009). Utopia has been referred to and is used in many ways, ranging from an impossible and fantastic dream to an alternative and better society (Levitas, 2013). In this chapter, we regard utopia as a method inspired by Levitas (2013), who understands it as an element of many individual and collective creative practices. Utopia entails holistic thinking to connect social, environmental, and economic dimensions in an imaginary sustainable future, which is done before possible actions for realizing the future are identified. To illustrate, the Amsterdam City Doughnut builds on doughnut economics to reshape and remodel social life by establishing novel practices towards an imaginary future (i.e. utopia) (Raworth, 2017). Hence, utopia is about examining the distant future as an ideal with a picture of the present in mind (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022). Utopia as a method is used to provide a future perspective on the live case method and to account for normativity competences and foresight thinking as crucial sustainability competences. Using utopia as a method keeps the students' focus on a desired sustainable scenario instead of focusing on problems in today's world.

System-Thinking Principles and the Complexity of Working with a Live Case

Sustainable entrepreneurship competences share several of the traditional, pure commercial entrepreneurship competences; however, there are differences (Lans et al., 2014). Students need to be trained to address more complex societal problems with environmental, economic, social, and/or ethical dimensions and problems interrelated in a system with a range of stakeholders. Thus, students need to understand the systemic level of society. Second, to develop sustainable solutions, students need to learn to be change agents and develop new business models that combine economic, social, environmental, and ethical dimensions. Thus, we argue that instead of focusing on existing problems, resources, and technology given by case owners, students need to focus on a desired sustainable society and then identify how the case can contribute to this society by developing creative solutions.

Identifying sustainable problems and solutions is becoming more popular among entrepreneurship educators; however, sustainability is currently viewed as just another problem to be solved. Today, most educators add sustainable pedagogical elements to existing entrepreneurship courses, and there are few efforts to combine sustainability and entrepreneurship to achieve more systemic-oriented, interdisciplinary, and foresighted-thinking teaching methods (Hermann & Bossle, 2020; Lourenço et al., 2013). Utopia realizing strives for the student to train in these skills.

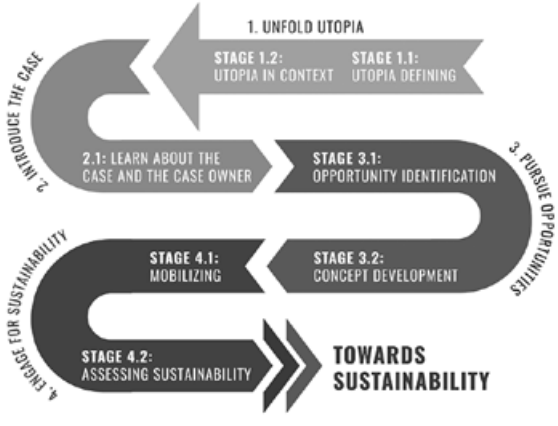
A Design Thinking-Inspired Process of Case Activities

During the last decade, design thinking has been used by entrepreneurship educators (Daniel, 2016; Linton & Clinton, 2019; Sarooghi et al., 2019) and educators using the live case method as teaching methodology (Fiore et al., 2019). Educators use design thinking to guide students through the steps from understanding a problem in a live case to identifying an opportunity, developing a suggestion for a solution, prototyping the solution, and developing a plan for resource mobilization (Daniel, 2016).

Design thinking has traditionally been used by designers to form, style, design, redesign, and construct artefacts (Linton & Clinton, 2019). Nowadays, design thinking is seen as assisting entrepreneurs in developing solutions to existing problems. Students who are guided by design thinking are found to improve their creativity and entrepreneurial mindset (Henriksen et al., 2017). These three pedagogical underpinnings guided us through designing and developing the utopia-realizing methodology and the attributed features of its application. The methodology is designed such that students first work on the utopia before the live case is introduced, including an entrepreneurial decision to be made. The live case method is used to train students in acting entrepreneurially and introduces the 'real world' with current and actual situation(s) that require entrepreneurial action to come a step closer to their utopia.

DESCRIPTION OF UTOPIA-REALIZING METHODOLOGY

Utopia realizing is designed as a process along four phases, which are visualized in Figure 12.1. In Phase 1, the students—organized in groups—develop a utopia scenario of a sustainable society. In Phase 2, the students are presented with the case and visit the case owners. Phase 3 is about opportunity development to move closer to the utopia defined in Phase 1. In Phase 4, students try to develop a plan for how to mobilize resources and for stakeholders to realize the opportunity identified in Phase 2. In the next sections, the stages are explained in more detail.



Source: Author's illustration. Designed by Iris Ørnhaug, Nord University Business School.

Figure 12.1 Utopia realizing

Unfold Utopia

The unfold utopia phase is inspired by Levitas's (2013) utopia as a method. Discussion, storytelling, scenario-building, imagination, and decision-making take place during this phase.

Stage 1.1 in Phase 1 of the utopia-realizing methodology, utopia defining, is devoted to the utopia concept. The student first defines what sustainability is in the case context (i.e. a geographical location, such as the county of Nordland for our pilot case) as the basis for creating the utopia. Examples of aspects to be discussed and agreed upon by the student groups are interaction with nature, characteristics, and form of living, including values and sustainability stance (i.e. deep ecology versus shallow ecology or strong versus weak sustainability) and the economy of the geographical location. This is a creative stage, and students should not be concerned with problems such as 'This is not possible' and 'How can we reach this?'. Spaced-out ideas and alternative forms of living are welcomed in this phase (Neck et al., 2014). Offering the students a template in a utopian canvas consisting of several boxes to fill in will facilitate this process. The utopia created in this stage will guide the students through the next stage of Phase 1.

In Stage 1.2, the students describe how a marine hub (i.e. the case context) can fit into and contribute to the transition towards utopia. An example of a question the students answered in our pilot is 'What are the functions of the marine hub and what functions shall buildings in your scenario have?' More concretely, it is about designing what kind of functions and qualities a marine hub should have to contribute to the sustainable utopia scenario developed in Stage 1.1. By completing Phase 1, the students went from a broad sustainability utopia for Nordland to a concrete case. In doing so, the students reflected upon a marine hub in their utopia before the case was introduced and boundaries were set.

Introduce the Case

In Phase 2, the narrative and owners of the live case are introduced. The live case is ideally local and can be from the industrial or public sectors. The students should have the chance to visit the case owners to become familiar and engage with the case. During our pilot round, the students visited both the case owners and several stakeholders. We were explicit with the case owners that the focus should not be on their ideas for the marine hub but instead the resources and external conditions relevant for the marine hub. Given that this methodology starts with utopia, we were careful not to focus on the problems of the case owners. After the introduction to the live case, the process continues with pursuing opportunities within the utopia and the feasibility of the case.

Pursue Opportunities

Phase 3 is about action to move towards the utopia through pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities for the case owners. Phase 3 is divided into two stages: 3.1, opportunity identification and 3.2, concept development. In this phase, we suggest utilizing the triple-layered business model canvas (Joyce & Paquin, 2016) and prototyping (Noyes, 2018) to guide the case activities.

Stage 3.1 is concerned with opportunity identification. It starts with identifying opportunities within the utopia scenario. Opportunities are defined as new means–ends relationships. The end is the utopia created in Phase 1, and the means are the resources of the case owners and their networks. In the end, the opportunity the students identified becomes a combination of what was desired in the utopian state and what was doable given the resources and external conditions of the company.

Stage 3.2 concerns concept development. Here, the students develop the identified opportunity into a concrete concept. The functionalities, qualities, and values of the concept are to be defined as inputs for developing a prototype. Through prototyping, ideas become more visual and concrete. The protype can easily be set up by using materials at hand and can be performed in a short time (Noyes, 2018). We encourage the educators to prepare a materials box for each student group with a variety of materials and equipment to build a prototype. At the end of Phase 3, the students will have a concrete sustainability concept. Because implementing sustainability concepts comes with many challenges (Garcia et al., 2019), the utopia-realizing methodology includes parts of the implementation stage, which is our Phase 4.

Engage for Sustainability

The last phase of the utopia-realizing method is called engage for sustainability. This phase includes Stages 4.1, mobilizing and 4.2, assessing sustainability. Mobilizing and assessment are crucial when implementing a sustainability concept. For example, resources have to be assigned to the concept, stakeholders need to be engaged, and the sustainability impact of the concept must be assessed and documented for both internal and external use.

In Stage 4.1, mobilizing, students develop two matrixes: one for the resources that need to be allocated for the project and the other for the stakeholders who would have an interest in the

project. These two matrixes will then help the students to identify a strategy for resource mobilization to implement the concept. At the end of this stage, the students formalize a strategy for how to allocate and assign the needed resources and how to engage stakeholders.

The final stage of the utopia-realizing methodology, 4.2, concerns assessment of the sustainability impact of the concept. The students assess the sustainability of their concept by referring to the utopia they have developed in Phase 1. The aim of this stage is to define what aspects of the project are sustainable and contribute to sustainable development—in particular, to the UN Sustainable Development Goals—and which aspects hinder sustainable development and/or are unsustainable.

Hence, after completing all stages of the utopia-realizing methodology, the students will have developed a sustainable concept within the boundaries of the live case and their utopia and evaluated it in ways that contribute to the transition towards sustainability.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we discuss the learning outcomes reported by the students who participated in the pilot course using the utopia-realizing methodology and the reflections of authors who either developed and conducted the course or collected the data.

The methodology has been tested in a course called Sustainability in Practice, where data were collected to study the impact of the methodology using semi-structured interviews, observations, and reflection notes written by the students. Sustainability in Practice is a cross-faculty course at the bachelor level, where biology and business students work together in interdisciplinary teams. All 12 course participants were studied.

The students emphasized that the teaching methods and tools used in the course influenced their learning process. For example, working with the live case encouraged the students to place a higher value on the importance of sustainability when working with entrepreneurship, while empowering them for actions to realize their sustainable ideal. A student explained, 'It was exciting to design the marine hub. I believe it gives some extra kick when there is an actual customer' (student's reflection note). This illustrates that using a student-centred approach, such as a live case, facilitates learning by increasing inner motivation and meaningfulness (Vallera, 2014). A student stressed, 'It gave me a sense of importance and proved to me how important sustainability is and how much power I do have to change it' (student's reflection note), while another student noted, 'It's a pleasant way to learn a bit about how to actually take some action' (student interview). Hence, ownership, empowerment, and engagement are further important aspects of the learning process, resulting in various outcomes.

The students stated that participating in the course increased their entrepreneurial mindset and skills (i.e. creativity, dealing with uncertainty, and opportunity development skills) and their understanding and competences for sustainability, such as systemic and foresight thinking and collaboration skills, which we turn to now.

Our study shows that the students developed their *entrepreneurial mindset*, as they reported they became more aware that they could be change agents towards a more sustainable society. One student explained: 'I did not think before that I could actually do anything with

any company or anyone to improve anything, but now I saw it's actually possible' (student interview), while another reflected: 'There are a lot of small steps I can take to play my role in creating a sustainable society' (student's reflection note).

Further, the students reported that they had increased their *creativity and skills to deal with uncertainty*. A student reflected that the methodology facilitated their creative skills by working with an uncertain situation:

> The course challenged our technical and creative skills, which felt a bit sudden, and there was much chaos and uncertainty as a result. The outcome, though, made everything seem worth it, and it definitely tied in with the central theme of using what we already have to create something of value. (Student's reflection note)

Systemic thinking is regarded as a typical competence of sustainability. One student explained the change in her view of sustainability to a more systemic perspective: 'I think I actually learned a lot, to think a bit broader and how the systems can be improved so that more people can live a more sustainable life, basically, and not just individual people' (student interview). The student reported that working on their utopia increased their foresight thinking skills, while stressing that working on the utopia was challenging.

Further, discussion and decision-making are central aspects of the utopia-realizing methodology, which was also noticed by the students. One student stressed the usefulness of dialogue in teamwork:

> But, it's a dialogue. And just realizing that you and a person can have different opinions on something. … And there are ways to get people to see things from your perspective by properly addressing them. And to be able to see something, and to turn it around in many ways to get the full scope of it rather than just like take it at face value. (Student interview)

Moreover, the group work taught the students to learn about their own competences and to apply their own knowledge. One student found it interesting to acknowledge the usefulness of their own knowledge: 'It was interesting to use the knowledge that I have acquired through the years at university and to see the intertwining of information' (student's reflection note). Finally, the case owner also benefited from the relationship; they were open to hearing a new perspective, and they eventually gained insights from students' sustainability solutions.

The pilot study indicates that the utopia-realizing methodology has the potential to develop key skills for sustainable entrepreneurship. Since we tested the methodology on both business students and biology students, we suggest that it is suitable for both business and non-business students.

However, using utopia realizing is not without its difficulties. For those interviewed, utopia as a method and the live case study differed a lot from the teaching approaches they were more familiar with. Using utopia realizing created uncertainty, confusion, and even anxiety for some students. Because the activities integrated in the utopia-realizing methodology are open-ended and demand several decisions from students along the way, mentoring and feedback from educators is crucial. Ideally, educators will provide frequent mentoring for each activity.

Further group and in-class reflections can help to identify and address challenges and issues the students face along the four phases of the utopia-realizing methodology.

In the pilot, we tested the new methodology on a small group of students. Thus, the methodology might need adjustment to be generalized to larger classes in entrepreneurship education. Since it might be difficult for a larger class to visit the case company if they have space limits, the educator can add more cases, enabling the students to visit different companies in smaller groups. If visiting the case company is impossible, a digital presentation of the company in class is also an option.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CASE TEACHING PRACTICE AND REFRAMING THE CASE METHOD FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

This chapter has illustrated that the novel teaching methodology utopia realizing increases students' entrepreneurial skills and mindset while they learn to think in systems. The utopia-realizing methodology reframes parts of the live case method by introducing a novel order of case activities and engaging the students in defining a sustainable, desired future (i.e. utopia) before they are presented with the live case narrative. While existing methodologies teaching sustainable entrepreneurship most commonly present the narrative of the live case early in the learning process, utopia realizing seems to improve the foresight, systems thinking, and normative skills of the students, since they do not limit their solutions for a better future to problems. The students found that starting by creating a utopia broadened the set of identified opportunities. Even though authenticity is often highlighted as important in entrepreneurship education (Aadland & Aaboen, 2020), the reality can limit the opportunities and sustainability the students can envision from an early stage. Thus, when working with sustainable entrepreneurship, it is advisable not to introduce the real world too early as it can limit the sustainable opportunities the students can grasp.

Throughout the education system, students are well trained in understanding what needs to be done to get a good grade and are seldom challenged with what they want the world to look like. By working on a utopia, the hidden assumptions, norms, and values of the students are brought forward. When working in groups, the students have to agree on their utopia—a utopia all team members feel comfortable with and that could reflect their own perceptions of a sustainable society. Hence, we suggest that a case need not include challenges or issues but can be formed around a self-defined ideal situation, such as the sustainable future, which requires entrepreneurial action to make utopia real.

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