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Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Overdiep, C. (Author), & Koffeman, A. (Author). (2020). Changing teacher perspectives: Game-based scenario writing.. Web publication/site, Social publishers foundation. https://www.socialpublishersfoundation.org/knowledge_base/changing-teacher-perspectives-game-based-scenario-writing/

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Changing Teacher Perspectives: Game-Based Scenario Writing

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About The Author



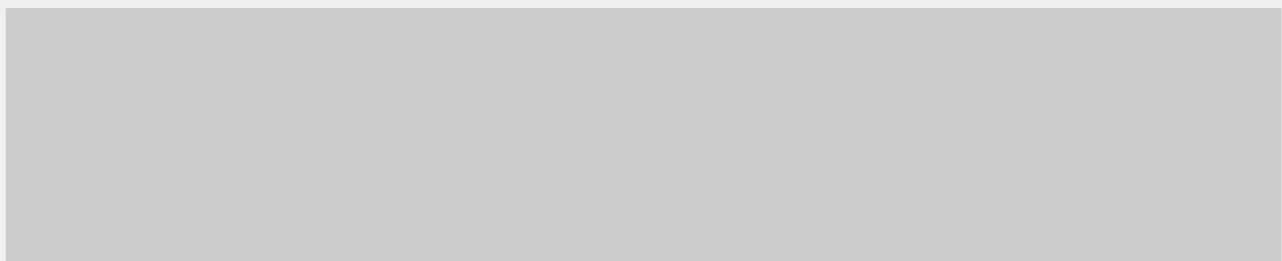
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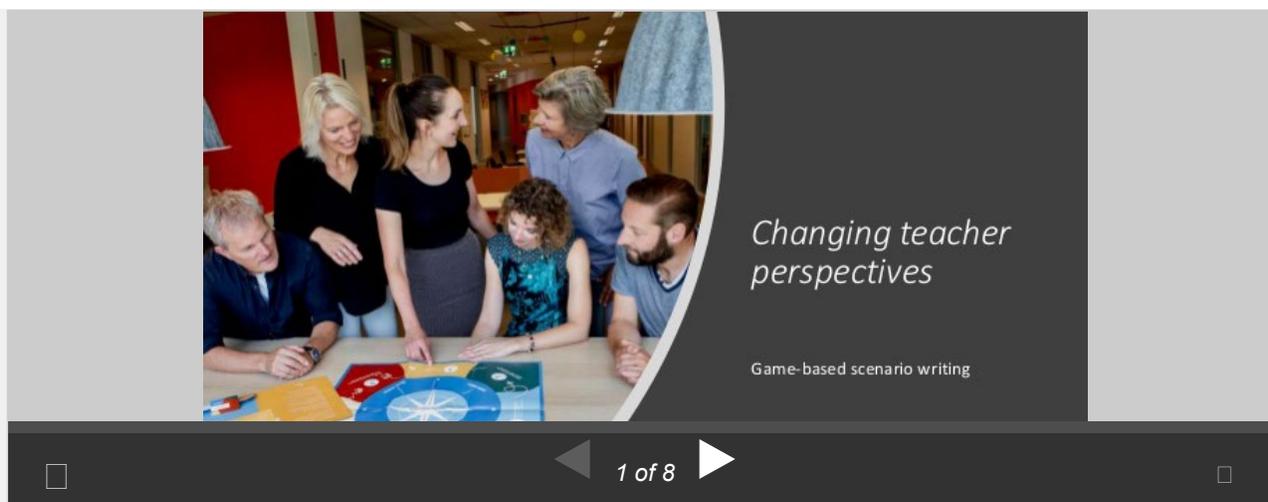
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Product Description

A group of Dutch teachers, as part of their Master's programme, developed a game that allows teachers to break free from their day-to-day affairs and reflect on futures by designing scenarios about the future of their school. In this game-based approach the journey of scenario exploration is composed of seven steps: (1) choice of a theme and timeframe, (2) selection of key dilemmas on which two scenario axes will be based, (3) understanding the

content and context of a “matrix” provided for the game, (4) setting up scenario groups, (5) developing four scenarios, (6) sharing scenarios, and (7) reflection on the scenarios. For this approach a two-dimensional matrix is used, for which two unpredictable trends (uncertainties) are selected as the axes of the matrix. By combining these uncertainties in a matrix, four different scenarios emerge (see the example in the slideshow).

A great array of subthemes can be chosen on both of the axes, but it is important that the selected scenario theme should be relevant to all participants and that these participants feel they ‘own’ the themes. For the timeframe typically a period of 10 to 15 years is chosen. If the timeframe is too short, participants might think that nothing will really change within that timeframe. If the timeframe is too long, the discussions might become too abstract, too far away from today’s situation. When participants have a clear and shared understanding of each of the axes, four subgroups are formed, and each group is randomly assigned to one of the scenarios. Random assignment is crucial because participants may have more chances to break free from their prevailing mental models.

The assignment for each group is to bring the scenario to life in such a way that it can convince other participants that their scenario is the best for the future of their school. This can be done by using role-play, writing a story or promotional material for the school, drawing the school, or describing its organizational model, etc. Whichever method is used, it should be convincing, consistent, plausible, challenging and recognizable. To make the scenarios comparable, a format for each scenario description can be provided, so they all have the same structure and cover the same elements. Once the four subgroups have developed and designed their scenarios, they present them to the other groups, each promoting their scenario as the most attractive option. This approach was utilized not only because the activity is more fun, but also because it challenges the participants to liberate themselves from their prevailing mental models.

In the final (and most important!) step, the participants make the link between the scenarios and their own school, by identifying the implications and consequences of each of the four different scenarios. Possible questions to discuss may include: What are the most and least probable or desirable scenarios? What should we do to move our scenario away from most likely

towards most desirable? How do we avoid the worst-case scenario? Who wins in what scenario? What repercussions do the four scenarios have for our school and the society? The answers to these questions can help identify common or different viewpoints, mental models, underlying values, etc. and can give direction to decision making on policies on school development.

Product Context

This product was developed by a group of twelve experienced teachers. These teachers were also students in a Dutch master's programme that aims at developing their teacher leadership: "the process by which teachers, individually and collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p.287). The master's programme is meant for experienced teachers and, to a lesser extent, school leaders from primary, secondary and tertiary education. Students in this programme can gain understanding of how to stimulate professional learning, both their own and also that of their colleagues. Designing the game together and playing it with their workplace colleagues helps achieve the programme's goal. The game is based on scenario planning theory, an approach originally designed for business to help them anticipate future developments (Chermack & Nimon, 2008). The game was also presented (and played) during a symposium that formed the last activity of their master's programme. The photos in the slideshow were made during the symposium.

Research Base for This Product

Background

In a constantly changing society, those responsible for education have the task of grappling with societal developments and the resulting consequences for the education system. These changes in society may concern globalization, knowledge acceleration, the rise of the information society, growing cultural diversity, changing expectations of pupils, parents and society as a whole, etc. (OECD, 2019). These changes simultaneously take place on political, social, economic, cultural, technical and demographic levels and have a huge impact on the future of the education sector (Buchberger,

Campos, Kallos, & Stephenson, 2000). In this sector, time and again teachers feel that they are being overtaken by these changes and developments, and the result is an educational system that is lagging behind.

Finding Proactive Approaches

To overcome this backlog, it is necessary to change (or start!) dialogues on innovation in schools. The focus on the here and now (which tasks do our schools have today?) needs to shift to a perspective that includes the future, and the local and global environment of the school (what future challenges does our school face?). Moreover, this shift in perspective should not just be a matter for school leaders but should also include teachers.

Strategy 1: Future Forecast. To be able to prepare for the future, you first need to predict the future. The problem with predicting the future is that it will always be *just* a prediction. Chances are that the future will be very different from what many people imagine or predict. Benammer, Dale, Poortinga, Schwab and Snoek (2006) developed “scenario writing” as a helpful tool to stimulate a future oriented dialogue among *all* members of the school community, to prompt sensitivity towards future developments and provide arguments for decisions on policies for school development. Snoek, Brückel and Willms (2019) argue that future oriented strategies in schools can take different forms: forecasting the future, designing the future and writing future scenarios. Forecasting aims to identify key trends in society and how these trends will impact society and education. An example of a key source for this is the OECD publication ‘Trends shaping education’ (2019) that is updated every three years. This can be an important source for schools to decide on future directions and strategies. But the problem is that many publications on societal trends present these trends as certainties that move forward autonomously. They tend to overlook that these trends – that are largely based on human behaviours – can be influenced by people. In other words: the way they are presented leaves little room to proactively shape or influence the future, as these trends “will happen anyway”.

Strategy 2: Future Design. A different form of dealing with the future is actively designing it. Contrary to forecasts, this form emphasizes the way in which schools can design their own future by conscious choices, clear ambition and proactive strategies. The underlying idea is that through

carefully planned action, society and schools can be shaped and constructed according to our wishes and ideas. The danger here is that wishful thinking dominates and realistic assessments of forces in society are not taken into account. According to Snoek et al. (2019) school leaders (and everyone else involved in education) must find a balance between these two strategies: between a future that is understood as a result of an unchangeable force of nature that schools need to adapt to, and as something that is possible to define and to design as schools. This leads to a third strategy, called *scenario writing*.

Strategy 3: Scenario Writing. *Scenario writing* (also called scenario thinking or scenario planning) involves, on the one hand, school leaders and teachers being seen as active actors that can help shape the future direction of their school, while, on the other hand, it recognizes the fact that not all developments in society can be influenced by decisions taken at the school level. Scenario writing takes uncertainties into account by not defining one possible future but multiple possible futures. This strategy appreciates uncertainty and leaves room for choice and direction by developing alternative future scenarios. Writing several alternative scenarios for the future underlines that there is not one pathway into the future, but that there are in fact multiple possible futures. There are varying definitions of scenarios and the activity of scenario writing, but on one point there is consensus: they are not meant to predict the future, but to help shape it (Scearce & Fulton, 2004; Van Notten, 2006). Other characteristics include that scenarios are hypothetical, causally coherent, internally consistent, and/or descriptive (Van Notten, 2006).

The method of scenario writing was originally developed to help businesses prepare for future uncertainties. In these settings, the aim of writing future scenarios is to maximize a company's ability to anticipate and act in a competitive global market. For example, scenario writing promotes the construction of multiple plausible futures in which decision makers can "play" with decisions hypothetically and consider the effects of each of these (Chermack & Nimon, 2008). In educational settings, scenario writing has been used to broaden teachers' perspectives on future developments in the field. The underlying assumption is that writing future scenarios stimulates teachers to think 'out of the box' and recognise developments in society that are relevant to their field and acknowledge the interdependence and the

complexity of systems (Benammer et al., 2006). Writing scenarios also means challenging the assumptions that are taken for granted about the future, the organization and its environment. Mental models encompass those assumptions (Chermack, 2005). They incorporate our preferences, experiences, biases and beliefs about how the world works, and therefore an individual's mental model has a significant influence over his/her ability to perform and function within this world (Chermack, 2003; Glick, Chermack, Luckel, & Gauck, 2012). Very often we are not consciously aware of our mental models and the effects they have on the way we think and behave, making it very difficult to change them. Scenario writing works as a catalyst force to identify and question mental models (Benammer et al., 2006; Glick et al., 2012). Gorodetsky and Barak (2009) argue that these forms of interactions promote professional learning because they mobilise forces that constructively contradict current tacit routines and consensuses. Verbalising implicit ideas or tacit knowledge is both a result from and a condition for social learning (e.g., Eraut, 2000).

Theory into Practice: Toward a Game-based Approach. The game-based approach to scenario writing, as described above, is used to provoke dialogue, interaction and thoughtful reflection in teams, stimulating a more open attitude to external influences and challenging the mental models that individuals have. Moreover, in this setting, scenario writing is an instrument to facilitate collaborative learning; the scenarios are not a goal in themselves, but they are a tool that helps to shape a learning process.

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To cite this work, please use the following reference:

Overdiep, C., & Koffeman, A. (2020). *Changing teacher perspectives: Game-based scenario writing*. Retrieved from https://www.socialpublishersfoundation.org/knowledge_base/changing-teacher-perspectives-game-based-scenario-writing/

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