

Beyond Hostility

Finding & Creating Inclusive Models for Co-Creation

Posted to the PhD Design List
September 28, 2007 by GK VanPatter

NextD
DEFUZZ THE FUTURE!

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In August of 2007 a Doctoral Candidate in England posted the following question to the PhD Design Discussion List:

From: John
Date: Wed, 29 Aug 2007
To: <PHD-DESIGN@JISCMail.AC.UK>
Subject: Designers are from Venus, Managers are from Mars

Dear all,

I like Roger Martin's description of designers as validity-oriented, compared with business managers & leaders who are more reliability-oriented [http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/sep2005/id20050929_872877.htm]. Designers' output, he says, aims to meet an objective which can only be substantiated with future tests, whereas typical managers and business leaders prefer to work with (and demand) reliability – the production of consistent, replicable outcomes.

General as they are, his terms seem to make sense to me, but I can't help thinking this must be well-trodden ground in design research. Is this so? I'd like to collate a list of similar design-versus-business stereotypes from literature, and would appreciate any suggestions.

Best wishes from sunny Cambridge.

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John
Doctoral Candidate
Institute for Manufacturing
Cambridge University, England.

In September 2007 GK VanPatter posted this reply to John and the PhD Design Discussion List:

From: GK VanPatter
Date: Wed, 29 Sept 28 2007
To: <PHD-DESIGN@JISCMail.AC.UK>
Subject: Designers are from Venus, Managers are from Mars

John: Earlier I noticed your post regarding the Roger Martin / Rotman model but have been traveling so apologies for this late reply. If you are interested in the subject of cross-disciplinary team sense-making you are welcome to participate in a NextD exercise that we began conducting last year in collaboration with several graduate schools internationally. It's called DeFuzzing WHO / Understanding Ourselves in the Context of Cross Disciplinary Innovation. We usually do the exercise with instructors but if you round up a group of 12 students you can participate and we will make the tools available to you for free, for one morning or afternoon. DeFuzzing WHO is designed as a simple classroom exercise. It involves three simple tasks and takes a couple of hours to do.

To be as tactful as possible here: I believe you will find out for yourself, by doing the exercise, that in the real world gaining insights into attributes and preferences of cross-disciplinary teams is not as simple as preassigning attribute tags to disciplines as proposed in the Roger Martin / Rotman model.

To suggest that some humans have preferences for validity and some for reliability is one thing but to suggest that we can predetermine and hard wire those notions to specific disciplines, especially without any blind self-determination mechanism is something quite different. The Martin / Rotman validity/reliability model appears to be more of a hypothesis rather than a real operationalized tool. Obviously there is a huge difference between those two things.

FYI: We have known for numerous years that anyone calling themselves a designer or a business manager could lean towards any one of a number of different problem finding/solving styles or preferences. For some time we have known that organizing teams by discipline tags alone is no longer meaningful, no longer enough if the goal is to create diversity of thinking, especially today when anyone can pretty much call themselves anything. Apparently it is news to the Rotman crowd but discipline tags as a single organizing principle have for some time been obsolete.

In addition you probably will want to think carefully about what you ultimately intend to do with the models and tools John. If your goal or responsibilities happen to involve building a co-creation culture in a cross-disciplinary organizational setting, based not only on inclusion, but equality and trust, you will have to find real tools that are relatively power bias free.

For example you cannot have one preference called innovator and the others called dogs breakfast and chopped liver. In the literature there is a lot of this kind of structural power-based stuff around. Some of it is quite subtle.

Language plays an important role in fostering inclusion so if you are going to be responsible for enabling the conditions for inclusive innovation you will need to heighten your precisions and your sensibilities considerably in this regard.

Having some business media attention around a model does not guarantee it is suitable as a basis for co-creation. You will need to extend your expertise far beyond that of the media. If you have, as a design oriented person, been focused on form and function you will likely need a new set of lenses...:-) It is actually quite difficult to find inclusive co-creation tools and models rather than abrasive and or power biased ones.

Have you studied the Rotman models and interconnected points of view closely? There are interesting orientations and tonalities for you to consider there John. The Rotman narrative, the Rotman approach appears to be, by design, oriented towards one group navigating the hostility of another (“Designing in HOSTILE Territory”). What does that sound like to you? Does that sound like a formula for equality and co-creation?

Today, in the spirit of co-creation we see many disciplines coming together to collaborate like never before. One of the challenges is to sort out and make sense of the various models. With the best of intentions many have ideas and models that can be and often are extremely helpful. In practice we use many tools from outside of design and have for many years. Others arriving on the scene with the same good intentions, offer up models, often historically based, that can be counter productive to the greater goal of inclusion and fairness for all involved in co-creation. Keep in mind that inclusion and integrative cross-disciplinary thinking have not been the focus of traditional business education for many generations. Why would we assume that they are experts?

One scenario that is not uncommon to see, due to various educational defaults, is models being proposed where judgment is positioned as the highest form of value. Guess which type of graduate school program has been teaching judgment/convergence as its central focus for decades? These are typical challenges from the strategic space today, a space where designers are already operating. The old rules and the old game have changed. Who is most equipped to lead in the new game is a question that is being answered in the competitive marketplace every day. Design education institutions are part of that marketplace.

Today every discipline is reinventing itself to one degree or another. Each has its own peculiarities. Design is no exception. If you are studying design history you will know that embedded there are some quite complex and deeply rooted entanglements around the orientation of design in society.

At various times in history design has gotten itself into trouble by becoming too subservient to business. That is not a future that we seek to repeat for design. Although you might not know it by listening to some design education leaders but subservience is quite different from co-creation and collaboration. We as a new generation of design leaders must be conscious of this history, this tendency among some of our last generation leaders and guard against a repeat of this folly in this new age. There is no need for design to be positioned as subservient today yet the tendency continues. It is clear that we must rid our design education systems of the subservience factor however in some schools it is built right into the learning system.

I am always astonished to hear design educators advocating its continuance as a route to maintaining their status quo and even proposing it as a good route to the future for design. Instead we need to be among those out in front of the old messes creating the conditions for co-creation among many disciplines including ourselves.

As we work with other disciplines outside of design we have to be more aware that there are forces in the world that have a tendency towards power and we can help untangle those forces for the greater good. This is not a desired future state but rather already among the important tasks for co-creation strategists and innovation process leaders. To get there, to be able to do this work in the face of very well meaning collaborators with problematic power models is difficult work.

No tools or models are perfect however you can find inclusive ones that are reasonably power unbiased both inside and outside of design if you condition yourself to know what you are looking at. What exactly am I talking about? If you choose to participate in the DeFuzzing WHO exercise you will experience an example of one such tool. In terms of its development, refinement and application it is ten years ahead of the Martin / Rotman model...☺ It is inclusive. In its language it is not power biased. All preferences are equal in value. It has research behind it. It is an operating tool, not a hypothesis. It is even interconnected to other tools and by the way, it was not invented by a person with a design background.

In closing I will point out for those journalistically minded participants among us here that in addition to the question that John asked, there are actually two bigger stories embedded there. These might be research or story opportunities for some.

1. In spite of the fanfare around the Martin / Rotman model including it being featured at several high profile graduate design schools last year...to a significant degree the Rotman crowd presently seems to be unaware that problem solving preferences to a significant degree transcend disciplines. Awareness of this leads to quite a different innovation enabling story. Co-creation is not, or does not need to be, about one group gearing up to navigate another groups hostility. If that is what is going on in your organization you are using the wrong models.

Creating sustainable human-centered innovation capabilities within organizations today involves rethinking old power projections among other things. It is unlikely that the business schools are going to be leading the charge there. Human-centered design oriented firms already competing in the 3.0 strategic co-creation arena have quite different models to offer. For some time NextD has been significantly out in front of NextB.

2. Another interesting story embedded in John's post is even more difficult and that involves the question of why has the intelligentsia of design academia (largely represented by this list) not stepped up and taken on the task of unpacking and questioning the widely distributed Martin / Rotman models and their interconnected points of view regarding design and designers.

We cannot expect the design press to do so as there is really no such thing!
There is no design press.

Surely this highly sophisticated list group must be fully aware of the odd-ball orientations in the Martin models. If such models had no consequences for design it would not make a difference but clearly they do and they will have consequences for future generations. Isn't this kind of questioning what leaders are supposed to do? The thing is its not enough anymore to just talk among ourselves on lists like this.

Many in design academia still seem to view business schools in the old fashioned way as remote from what their students are learning how to do and full of future design patrons without understanding that world is long gone.

Your students will soon have to collaborate with and probably even compete in the marketplace with Rotman students. They might find themselves sitting in organizations with these models. You might ask yourselves, or perhaps more appropriately your students might ask you: Are you training your graduate students to work for Rotman graduates or to operate as equals with them in the strategic space where challenge framing and other important activities take place?

Students are smart today and they are asking: where are your models and tools? For the cost of a graduate or post-graduate design education today they should certainly be provided with some, not subservience based models but rather the opposite. The tools that they will need are those that they can use to lead and operate as equals in the strategic space and not be, by design, subservient to others. Is your school providing your students with such tools? Have you bought into or out of the subservience factor?

Suffice it to say there are lots of untold stories around.

Hope this is helpful.

John, let me know if you would like to participate in the DeFuzzing WHO exercise.

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