

Navigating Innovation

Understanding the KaosPilots

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NextD

Who will lead design in the 21st century?

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GK. VanPatter: Welcome, Uffe. Congrats on the new book. I'm sure that many of our readers will be interested in obtaining a copy. I highly recommend it for graduate design educators in particular. Although coming from a different angle, your program seems to strike very closely to the terrain of innovation leadership that we are exploring in this series, so I am delighted that you can join us in conversation here. While some of our international readers may be aware of KaosPilot, it is likely that the details of your philosophy and outlook are not yet well known in the graduate design education community. To begin, help us understand what the underlying objective is of your school and program in Aarhus, Denmark. What is the vision and mission there?

Uffe Elbæk: To understand the three-year KaosPilot program, you have to understand the historical and cultural roots we are coming from. The school and the program (bachelor-level) were established in August 1991, and were "born" out of the social and entrepreneurial grassroots movement, "The Frontrunners".

Working in a youth environment, The Frontrunners (which is still alive and kicking) did groundbreaking social, cultural and media projects in the 80's with a strong socially responsible attitude.

The focus was on how young unemployed people were able to take control over their own destiny - both personally and professionally.

Around 1989 – 1990, many of these projects turned into small dynamic business units: the art and cultural monthly magazine, "Agenda"; the house (music) club, "Club Kronstadt"; the multimedia company, "Mousehouse"; the multimedia education program, "Space Invaders"; and the theater house, "Entre Scenen".

It was from all these project and business experiences that a core group from The Frontrunners created the concept for a whole new entrepreneurial project management education program: The KaosPilots.

Or as we see ourselves today, a strong value-based international school of new business design and social innovation.

The last 12 years have been a fantastic (learning) journey with lots of ups and downs driven by an ambition to change the game. To change the game in business, in culture, in society, and so on.

In daily work with students, the staff continually tries to work with the delicate balance between theory (head) and practice (body), between the individual student and the team of students, between form and content and between the local and the global perspective.

Which, of course, is the same question all people in education are struggling with. The difference between a lot of higher education programs and the KaosPilot program is our cultural DNA. We came from the streets with a strong, strong identification with club culture.

Not to paint too black or white of picture, the mindset and cultural DNA of traditional business schools comes from golf clubs, whereas KaosPilot's DNA comes from house clubs.

That was the situation in 1991. And that is the situation in 2004. A lot has changed over the years, but the values are still the same: To be playful, real-world focused, streetwise, risk-taking, balanced and compassionate in everything we do.

Big words, I know, but that's our life. That's our reality. That's why the KaosPilots are the KaosPilots!

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GK. VanPatter: What is the average age of KaosPilot students? What backgrounds do they come from and how many years of professional industry experience do they typically have?

Uffe Elbæk: When they enter the program, the average age of the KaosPilot student is 24.

It's a great mix of young people coming mainly from two different life directions: Those who after high school or college (gymnasium in Denmark) have worked in the creative industries (film, design, music, communication, new media, etc) for some years, but now want to get more theoretical and deep, and those who went straight to the university after high school, but now are so damn bored about the whole university set-up that they want a more concrete, practical, action-orientated and reflective way of learning.

In a way you can look at the KaosPilot program as the global dancehall where "practice" and "theory" are dancing a fascinating hiphop/deephouse/tango together.

We always try to handpick a very diversified team of students – a good cocktail of students with highly different cultural and social backgrounds – because our track record tells us that team diversity is one of the secrets behind the success of the school and the program. :-)

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GK. VanPatter: How do you describe in a nutshell what students learn in the KaosPilot program?

Uffe Elbæk: First of all, they learn professionally and personally to navigate in an extremely fast moving global world. Or, said more "buzzword-y", they learn to keep their head cool and their heart warm...at the same time!

That said, the three professional focus areas for the students are project, process and business design. They are trained in designing, organizing and realizing new business and organizational ideas between the private, public and nonprofit sectors. We here at KaosPilot normally call this area the upcoming fourth sector.

25% of our graduates start their own business after the program. The rest are mainly working in already established fourth sector companies or organizations.

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GK. VanPatter: Help us understand what it means to be project-oriented at *KaosPilots* and why you decided to make that orientation the center of your program.

Uffe Elbæk: You have to understand that *KaosPilot* grew out of a very project-oriented grassroots movement: The Frontrunners. Back in the 1980s, everything in art, media and the social field was project-based (in Denmark at least). It was only later that the project form of organization went mainstream in the business community.

For the core team of The Frontrunners – of which I was a member – project management was a very clever and effective way of organizing, but also a way of living. It was that mindset we took with us when we created the *KaosPilot* education program back in 1991.

Today, every knowledge-based organization and business is involved in projects. So you have to understand how to organize and build up "smart projects" to fulfill the purpose of the job, but at the same time absolutely be attuned to the people who "are" the project/organization.

Organizations today are the people and all the relationships and emotions between people. Projects are living networks of people. That's a huge change from times past when you looked at organizations as machines.

If "the machine" did not work effectively enough, you just had to "fix it". Change something in it. Take the broken part out and replace it with a new part. That doesn't work today. It's absolutely not enough to just "run" a project. You have to live it, feel it, and understand the soul of the project and the people within the project.

You have to be much more a social architect today than a traditional "project manager". That's why at this time *KaosPilot* is so interested in social innovation. We want to change the game in business (and in society). We have to get social innovation up on top of the public agenda. We have to be social architects and designers, that's for sure!

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GK. VanPatter: You seem to be talking about architecture/design in the broadest sense as a visionary and constructionist activity. To differentiate between being a social architect or designer and being a traditional "project manager" implies not only a difference in orientation, but also of scale. Are KaosPilots in training to lead large-scale social architecture challenges?

Uffe Elbæk: The staff and the students have always been curious about how social systems work. From small-scale to large-scale systems, from team-level to organization-level to the local community-level...And all the way up to the meta-level.

Of course we are only in the first phase of understanding this very complicated systems thinking. This holistic/organic way of understanding is what really drives social development and innovation in our organizations, local communities, regions and the globe. Luckily, we have gotten a lot of input from friends and colleagues around the world telling us to be more precise in our language and mental models. Just to name a few: Margaret Wheatly, Per-Uno Alm, Dee Hock (and all the wonderful people in the Chaordic Commons), Anita Roddick, Ketan Lakhani, Otto Scharmer, Eugino Barba, and many, many more...smart, clever, warmhearted people.

That's what really fascinates me at the moment: That so many great people around the world are trying to develop a new social, cultural and political agenda (and language). The focus is not on each isolated element (or problem), but rather the interaction and relationship between the elements and parts of "the system".

In a way it's so simple – and yet so damn difficult!! It's not only a question that you have to "think out of the box", you also have to "work outside the box".

So how do you do that if you are in education? A business? A public institution? A grassroots organization? Or a design studio in New York?

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GK. VanPatter: Are these questions that KaosPilots are equipped to help organizations address? Are your graduates equipped to help transform organizations, to build sustainable innovation capabilities, or are you focused towards one-off, stand-alone projects? Would you say that KaosPilots are more geared towards baking loaves, teaching others how to bake or building innovation bakeries?

Uffe Elbæk: For the students, part of the training at the KaosPilots is to understand the difference between being a project leader/manager (starting up your own company) and being a process facilitator (coaching, mentoring, etc).

In our staff's opinion, it's crucial that the students in a split second are able to change focus from "me" to "us"...and back again. See and feel the concrete situations both from "the inside" and "the outside".

There is a huge difference between your own personal entrepreneurial ambition (ego) and the ability to develop an inner feeling and understanding for stewardship (compassion)....How to be a good process facilitator for other people, teams or organizations.

That's the reason that the main topic for first semester of the second year is "social innovation and process understanding". The students have to work very closely with external companies who are dealing with inner organizational conflicts or dramas.

Each student has to then be responsible for both designing and carrying out real time, real-life process facilitations for concrete companies. The students get "hands-on" experience with what on a deep level is really driving social innovation and change – in teams, in organizations, in local communities, and in each of us as human beings!

There is nothing wrong with a strong entrepreneurial drive. (Personally I can't live without it!). But without social compassion and the feeling for stewardship for the people you are working with, you and the organization are on the wrong track....heading directly into troubled waters. And we don't want that to happen, do we?

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GK. VanPatter: Many of our readers are design educators. Obviously the KaosPilot program is focused and structured very differently than traditional design schools. Help us understand what students learn about design at KaosPilots? What percentage of your faculty have design backgrounds? How important is design to what KaosPilots do?

Uffe Elbæk: When we opened the school back in August 1991, we didn't see ourselves as a design school. Not at all! But in a strange way we have always from time to time worked closely together with our friends in the design field.

Either the students have worked together on projects with students from the two main design educations here in Denmark or with design schools abroad. Right now, one of our third-year students is doing a very interesting project with a design school in Santiago, Chile. And another third-year student just did a design exhibition project in Berlin on "Flow".

When it comes to the staff, they have often invited good design people to teach at the school here in Aarhus. The school has also established more strategic partnerships with a few design schools around the world. The latest in that category is with the new Hyperwerk program in Basel, Switzerland.

I personally am involved in a design event in Copenhagen next year called “Index 2005”. It’s an international event with conferences, workshops and exhibitions, plus awards to the best design projects in different categories. Index 2005’s goal is to be for design what the Nobel Prize is for science.

So design and designers are part of our daily life at KaosPilot. But we still don’t see ourselves as a classic design education program. Even we use the word “design” in our three professional focus areas: project, process and business design.

At the same time, I have to say that our role model from day one was the Bauhaus education movement in Germany at the beginning of last century.

Even though Bauhaus was established more than 80 years ago, a lot of the thoughts and ideas from that period still sound fresh, important, and outstanding! So when you dive into the material from the Bauhaus period, you really get this feeling of “finding something new; lost in something old” – as an old ad from GAP jeans once went. :-)

For us at KaosPilot, design is a way of seeing, a way of understanding the dynamics and relationships in the world. So in that context, KaosPilot is most definitely a design education.

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GK. VanPatter: Can you give our readers a glimpse of what constitutes “process understanding” at KaosPilot. What do students learn about process and how do they learn it?

Uffe Elbæk: The different levels the students are trained and educated in process understanding include:

Teambuilding processes: How to build really smart and wise teams.

Learning processes: What is learning? How to learn to learn. How to learn together!!!

Creative processes: What is creativity? What factors support or kill creativity in organizations and teams?

Systemic thinking: What shapes and constitutes an organization? What kind of dynamics and relationships are organizations comprised of? What or who created the values and cultures in the organization?

Personal leadership (with a focus also on body knowledge)

Changes and process leadership

Process facilitation and process consulting

All this is, of course, buzzwords, but it perhaps gives the reader a feeling of the different process levels we are working on – from an individual focus, to a team

focus, to an organizational and local community focus. On each level the students will get theoretical input in combination with real-time, real-life projects.

In the first phase of the process training, we use the internal conflicts and dynamics of a specific team of students as case material.

The students work on problems and conflicts in their own teams. They explore issues such as: How to relate to themselves as members of the same team of students. What are their personal and cultural borders? What stops them from being authentic human beings? What stops them from learning or from unfolding their talent? What or who creates the rules of the game on their team? What does power mean? Who has the power? Who are the rule makers, rule takers and rule breakers on their team? And do they support the way their team contract has been created? The way the team culture has been created? Is there anything they would like to change? If so, how do they want to change it?

Students belong to the same team throughout the three-year program. They create a very special and intimate team relationship with each other over the years at KaosPilot!

After the classroom training, the students will work together with external companies or organizations for a specific period of time (four to eight weeks). The goal for the student is to work with specific internal processes in the companies.

After the students have worked with the team of staff people, designed, facilitated and documented the process, the students have to write a report to the school. After two or three weeks, the students have to present the report verbally to their coaches and team managers here at KaosPilot.

So the students get a lot of really, really deep insights into how process works. I think that is the reason why when students are involved in project work during and after the program, they really make a difference!

I just got an email from five female students, who for the last one and a half months have been working with young people, students and artists in Sarajevo on a huge art project.

The five female students went down to Sarajevo. There was no organization, no money, no power, no energy. After a month and a half of work, they created a huge event in which hundreds of young people from Sarajevo, together with local artists, created an inspiring art manifestation in the middle of the city about their hopes for the future. (Read about the project on our website!). Beside the hundreds of young people who were directly involved in the project, thousands of people came into the streets to support the event.

These young KaosPilot students couldn't have done that without a deep understanding for what motivates people, what drives a project, what is important for creating strong teams, what is good conflict-solving, what is strong communication, what is powerful vision-building, and so on, and so on.

Process understanding is a very important X-Factor for the educated KaosPilot student!

GK. VanPatter: Your X-Factor is closely aligned with NextD, so I can see we have a lot in common here. You are the first school that we have found so far to have really internalized the notion of process mastery as it relates to innovation, organizational settings and team dynamics. Most traditional graduate design schools are very far behind in this regard. The best process-oriented graduate design schools seem to be primarily focused on one-off product innovation executed by specialist designers rather than sustainable organizational innovation executed by cross-disciplinary teams. They typically lack sophisticated, interconnected team dynamics tools. Many talk the talk. Few walk the walk. This is part of the reason why we have a crisis of relevance in the design community.

In the short time that we have left, I would like to follow up on two of the points that you just made:

1. Creative processes: What is creativity and what factors support or kill creativity in organizations and teams?
2. Teambuilding processes : How to build really smart and wise teams.

Do you have specific visual process path models, tools and/or instruments that you use to teach the above? What role does visualization play in that teaching? Do you have interconnected instruments such as an individual and team Creative Problem Solving Profile that maps directly to your innovation navigation path model? Are KaosPilot students taught to be aware of their own problem solving preferences and how they impact behaviors? If you don't have these tools, perhaps you might be interested in finding out more in reference to the way that we think about and grapple with such issues at NextD and in our own practice.

Uffe Elbæk: I would love to work closely with NextD in the future; not only concerning developing even more sophisticated visualization tools for process mapping and documentation, but also for understanding the dynamic between design, social innovation and community building.

When it comes to process visualization tools, the KaosPilots have been hugely inspired by Grove Consulting in San Francisco. In some areas we have taken their tools and visualization design one step further. Without the inspiration from Grove Consulting, though, we would not be where we are today in terms of visualization and documentation of processes in organizations and teams.

The mixture of process understanding and facilitation, and at the same time the skills to visualize what is going on in the team between different people, is one of the stronger elements of a KaosPilot graduate's professional profile.

Another tool which is part of the student's toolbox is the ability to create dynamic café/workshops. It's one of the best ways I know how to share knowledge in big groups of people. Again, this tool came from the U.S. West Coast from a company called "World Café". Great people. We love them!!!

GK, during our dialog I have decided to come to New York in July just to see how you live, work and dream at NextD!

Because you are right, there is a lot to talk about rebuilding the connection between the U.S. and Scandinavia/Europe in terms of education, culture,

business and new life design! I really think that we - NextD and The KaosPilots (plus some of our other good U.S. friends) – should do something about it.

So let's start to play in a serious way! :-)

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GK. VanPatter: Is there a U.S.-based branch of the KaosPilot school in the works and if not, why?

Uffe Elbæk: We would love to do something in the U.S. Over the years, several U.S.-based people have thought about the possibility of creating a U.S.-KaosPilot education program.

Right now we have a dialog with two different groups of people in the U.S. concerning how we could test out the idea of a U.S.-based sister school to KaosPilot here in Scandinavia. The two groups are The Chaordic Commons and William Tate from the UMBAU project.

I think that the time is right to "export" the KaosPilot-concept. But we couldn't have done it before now because it's just now that we are coming to understand what works and what does not work. :-)

It's really interesting to see how our organization here in Denmark now is open to the possibility of creating other KaosPilot programs in the world. It's important for me to underline that these sister schools have to be locally-rooted.

We don't want to come with a fixed concept of how a KaosPilot program in the U.S. should look like. It has to be developed from the bottom-up, together with local people, formed out of a local need!

Otherwise, we don't want to do it!

Right now we are in a dialog with people in Norway, Sweden, Germany and Brazil concerning establishing KaosPilot-programs in their countries. If there is anyone in U.S. who wants to play with us and has the resources for a project (and process) like this, we are more than open.

The first step would be to come and visit us here in Denmark. If we are going to work seriously together, we have to start with a playful dance here at the school in Aarhus. :-)

So, is there anyone in the U.S. who wants to dance with us?

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