

Towards Adaptable Inquiry

Transforming That Sustainability Thing

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DEFUZZ THE FUTURE!

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A few thoughts came to mind over the weekend as I looked across some of last weeks list themes:

Is Everyone Everything?

Pragmatism

MultiPerspective SenseMaking

Marshall McLuhan

Herbert Simon

Donald Trump

Buckminster Fuller

Club of Rome

Media Ecology

Collaborative Design

What is Design?

Wicked Problems

Trans-Authority Dialogue

Bottom-Up Approach

Homologous Recombinations

Methods and Tools

Design Ecologies

Complex Adaptive Systems

For me that mix provided a much needed prompter to complete some writing that I have been toiling away on in the background for some time as part of the long overdue wrap up on Design 3.0. In the landing of that plane I have been grappling with how to make sense of and write about the difference between present notions of “sustainability” and what alternate reconfigurations are already looking like.

At a time when the blogosphere seems preoccupied with one–cycle views on many subjects, the connections between nineteenth century American transcendentalism, Bucky Fuller, and the current sustainability movement are interesting to consider. Without doubt the 21st century rise of neotranscendentalism is a fascinating subject and one that remains dear to the hearts of many of us with multi-cycle perspectives.

Last night I went to my home library to look up an old document and was surprised to see that it was twenty five years ago that I wrote a paper on the connections between Thoreau and Fuller as part of a Theory of Design class in undergraduate school. (Sure made me feel ancient!) Some of us have been swimming around in these waters for a long time. It is really interesting to see how some themes reemerge and are recontextualized.

In 2007 John Chris Jones and I constructed a conversation for NextD Journal in which we had close encounters with several themes that are reappearing in this discussion group. In that conversation Thoreau, Fuller, Osborne, Parnes, Gordon and a cast of other interesting characters make appearances. John Chris and I discovered that we have both long been admirers of Thoreau.

(Many of you will know that Bucky’s great aunt, Sarah Margaret Fuller edited the transcendentalist journal, “The Dial” for the first two years of its existence from 1840 to 1842).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Fuller

That conversation between John Chris and I can still be read and or downloaded for free. It turned out to be somewhat of a NextD Journal classic!

Double Consciousness

Back to the Future with John Chris Jones

<http://nextd.org/02/09/02/index.html>

Double Consciousness is a term intended to denote the play between SenseMaking and StrangeMaking that occurs in conversation, in innovation and in everyday life. For those who are interested, one can see deliberate SenseMaking and StrangeMaking in action in that conversation.

Since today we can find the original concerns of the American Transcendentalist movement being recontextualized and recombined on the global stage in the present day notions of sustainability by Al Gore, Alex Steffen, John Thackara and numerous others, how it might or might not connect to participatory co-creation, next design, inclusive innovation, whatever you choose to call it, are useful to consider.

For your consideration here are three views into why being a neotranscendentalist is not enough in the 21st century:

1.

It is no secret that the nineteenth century American Transcendentalists became influential globally and across the ages beyond anyone's wildest imagination. To compress a lot of complexity here: From an innovation perspective the Transcendentalists were visionary content experts, not masterful process experts.

Sitting by himself in the Walden Pond cabin Thoreau got some great thinking started and he was not a co-creation process expert as we would understand the term today. The Thoreau/Transcendentalist orientation roughly translated into 21st century design becomes the activist model, designers as content experts, designers as moral, social and or environmental activists. This is the Designer as a kind of 21st century ecologist. In this model there is a significant emphasis on critical thinking and on problem finding. Clearly some parts of our community believe that the future of design rests in our ability to be specialized content experts in "environmental sustainability". To some degree this logic fits well with historical notions of design as a form of inquiry that intermixed content knowledge and process knowledge simultaneously. In this model the person leading is in an intermixed content/process role. Historically this intermix has been what design was and to large degrees in many realms still is. To keep it simple lets call this Strategic Framework A.

Certainly all of us have an interest in imagining and advocating a better, more human-centered world. As I am writing this text, our Humantific UnderstandingLab is working with a team of amazing researchers and authors on the visual sense-making aspects of the very first detailed assessment of human development in the US. The American Human Development Report is based on the premise that people must be at the center of development. Being published by the Social Science Research Council and Columbia University Press it represents a significant challenge reframing manifesto.

The report is full of amazing (some might say depressing) insights about the human condition of America that will inform and hopefully inspire involvement, advocacy and change across many issues. Regardless, let's not get advocacy interests, rights and responsibilities confused with co-transformation methodology.

In the context of 21st century cross-disciplinary co-creation, participatory design, distributed innovation, or co-transformation we utilize and teach quite a different logic from Framework A. Lets call this Strategic Framework B. In this model, process knowledge is recognized as a deep well that is considered to be as important as content knowledge. In this logic we distinguish between content knowledge/roles and process knowledge/roles. The person "leading" co-creation among cross-disciplinary participants is in a process expert role not a content expert role. The participants are the content experts in the content roles. In this model there is significant emphasis on adaptable meta process, distributed orchestration and inclusive innovation. Designer as adaptable wicked problem facilitator is not the same as designer as environmental sustainability expert. To be brief, this has huge implications for traditional notions of design that few graduate schools have even begun considering.

These are two very different frameworks, forms of inquiry that amount to different languages. The mind-set, tool-set, behavior-set and power-set are all quite different. Traditional forms of design have a long experience with Framework A and often no experience with Framework B. All of this combined with the American-centric notion that Everyone is Everything makes for a complicated 21st century workscape.

We think of the ability to go back and forth between the two (or multiple) languages across a diversity of challenge types as Strategic Framework X. In a nutshell Framework X contains both Strategic Framework A & B as well as SenseMaking and StrangeMaking. This language adaptability is a key aspect of adaptable inquiry, ie: next generation design. Diverse challenges continuously changing require deliberately adaptable methods and tools. Moving away from the traditional notion of one discipline, one language, one person, one role, frees us to better address the diversity of continuously changing complexities that we now face.

Depending on the starting point, fuzziness, scale, complexity, stakeholders and context we might use Framework A, B or X. At various points in the process we take on different roles and behaviors within A, B or X.

Some might view X as an expansionist notion. We think of it as proactive adaptability. From the get-go that is what the NextD initiative has been all about.

2.

Bucky Fuller was an amazing out-of the box thinker who can teach us a lot about what is possible. An important, often overlooked, sometimes redepicted aspect of his story is that Bucky was not trained in school as an architect or an engineer.

This is important in the sense that this experience or lack there-of provided him with a kind of exquisite ignorance regarding the various boxes that architects, designers, engineers tend to put themselves into, thanks to discipline-centric educational institutions. How he transcended the boxes is perhaps the most important aspect of the Bucky story for young people to understand.

Unlike the model of contemporary design practice Bucky did what he did proactively. He was not looking to others to define the present and future for him. He was not waiting around for client framed “design briefs”. Operating with an inventors mind and from an inventors model he would, particularly in the early part of his career, proactively identify a challenge or opportunity, invent a solution and then look for a buyer for the idea later. As an inventor he used visual aids and prototypes to explain and sell. His Dymaxion house, bathroom, car, etc. were all approached in this way. In this sense Fuller was a transformer. Utilizing his version of Framework A, Bucky operated for much of his life, upstream from where traditional architects, designers and engineers were engaged.

Bucky was likely a Conceptualizer/Generator. His strength was in problem finding & framing. He was a problem finding maverick.

Since we are here to talk about transformation, it is likely important to appreciate that Bucky was doing the up-stream problem or opportunity framing, not in a co-creative way with multiple stakeholders but rather from a personal perspective regarding first what he thought industry needed and then later what he thought society needed. Many of his themes including environmentalism, mobile dwellings and world citizenship can be found in nineteenth century transcendentalism.

Like others before and after him, Bucky seemed to dip into transcendentalism and extract from it what made sense to his interests and causes. Taking up some aspects of transcendentalism and leaving other parts behind, he was actively engaged in recontextualization, homologous recombination, proactive adaptability (whatever we choose to call that) as are all of us in present day practice and in everyday life.

Lets also keep in mind that Bucky was not operating in any kind of organizational context where he was faced with the complexities of convincing coworkers or bosses that the challenges that he had identified were worth pursuing. Distributed change-making co-creation is often fundamentally important in this context. Similar forces come into play in broader society transformations where many entangled constituents and stake-holders exist.

For the most part, Bucky bypassed organizational structures and was working from an American perspective, in what I believe was the transcendentalist tradition, on the transformation of America and ultimately of planet earth. He had many prescient ideas and as far as I can tell, no process knowledge that was scalable to or applicable to organizational or social transformation. The combination that he took to market was big (opinionated/visionary) content knowledge, a particular focus on proactive problem finding and relatively small co-creation process knowledge.

Bucky remains a towering, inspiring model and depending on what operational context one chooses to work in that model might make perfect sense.

Bucky-like models present numerous challenges for our educational institutions. Is the mission to educate a next generation of independent minded and independently operating inventor mavericks and, or individuals who can operate and lead in complex cross-disciplinary contexts on a continuously changing set of challenges, all the way from fuzzy framing through to implementation? Each graduate school seems to have a different perspective on this question. Many schools are migrating away from the heroic maverick model. For others it is a model that still holds a lot of magnetism.

Most of us in practice do not operate under a “private sky” but rather one that is increasingly crowded with stakeholders.

3.

Respectfully acknowledging all the amazing problem identification work done by Thoreau, Bucky, Gore and zillions of others along the way, let’s then look at where we are proportionally in terms of emphasis and capability in relation to the complexities identified. If one side of any transformation coin is content knowledge and the other side process knowledge, it seems clear to us which side is over abundantly represented at this sustainability party and which is sorely still disproportionately absent.

In practice when we talk about sustainability we are referring to sustainability of continuously adaptable transformation capability rather than just environmental sustainability.

Excuse the metaphor but if we look under the hood of “sustainability” we find not one problem type but rather hundreds, probably thousands of problem types. What’s stopping us from repairing climate change cascades down into zillions of related challenges of tremendous diversity that extend far beyond climate. It seems clear that in a continuously changing world it is not enough for individuals, teams, organizations, regions and countries to be able to solve one type of problem.

We believe the deeper challenge for humanity and certainly for our educational institutions is to get beyond the present focus on content knowledge of one problem type and get to work on what we believe is our more fundamental challenge: creating sustainable adaptable transformation capabilities across multiple generations.

One of the secrets of next generation innovation and co-creation is to be aware that process knowledge is much more sustainable than content knowledge. Content knowledge tends to have relatively short relevancy cycles.

We might differ from popular notions of “complex adaptive systems” in the sense that we believe adaptive capabilities in humans, teams and organizations is not only naturally occurring but can be enhanced and accelerated.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complex_adaptive_system

We believe that adaptability focused skill-building can substantially reverse the damage done by decades of western education and restore innovation capacity in adult humans from diverse disciplines. ☺ Much of what we do in practice at Humantific is about enabling adaptive human systems.

With numerous content oriented neotranscendentalist advocates already at the sustainability table we see significant need for a better balance within the transformation equation. This imbalance remains the significant weakness in the neotranscendentalist tradition. Thoreau and Bucky would likely expect us, not to copy what they did, but rather be inspired by their work and engage as they did, in a recontextualization, homologous recombination process ourselves adding or subtracting pieces that make sense for us in a new 21st century context.

In parallel lets acknowledge that as an orientation co-creation has not begun with design. What is often referred to as a “bottom-up” approach is a common co-creation orientation in the land of Framework B. The truth is design is a relatively late arrival at the distributed creativity co-creation party. Others have been engaged in Framework B co-creation for decades. What is changing is that design is now at the party with new combinations of human-centered skills including meta process, innovation research, model thinking, and visual sense-making. Much of what is new involves those new cross-disciplinary combinations working together on equal terms. It is likely that there are already numerous forms of Strategic Framework X out there in the transformation design community actively at work.

While neotranscendentalist notions can provide great problem formulation impetus lets not get that one aspect confused with the broader meta process of co-creation and transformation. Lets not assume that content knowledge is process knowledge. It is not. Both are needed. Adaptable Inquiry represents a great chance to get ready for diverse challenges and continuous change.

Hope this is helpful.

We will likely be talking more about this at the upcoming OverLap 08 conference on June 13-15 if any one is interested. It appears that this year’s theme is “sustainability”. ☺

Thanks for the inspiration. Have a good week all.

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