

Transition Design Symposium

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Position Paper

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Introduction

“Unsustainability is structurally designed into our everyday life; it is the result of concrete design practices, hence the crucial importance of the reconfiguration of design. Whether couched in terms of radical sustainability innovation (Tonkinwise 2013), sustainability as flourishing (Ehrenfeld 2008), Sustainment (Fry 2012), environmental complexity (Leff 1998), or going beyond reason-centered culture (Plumwood 2002), at stake is a decentering of design from its anthropocentric and rationalistic basis and its recreation as a tool against the unsustainability that has become entrenched with the modern world. Succinctly, if we are at risk of self-destruction, we need to reinvent ourselves ontologically (Fry 2012) (Willis, 2006)

This position paper on Transition Design addresses three questions posed in the Transition Design provocation and briefing and attempts to outline several systems level approaches to thinking, acting and behaving differently in the face of the anxiety provoked by what is described above as the “risk of self-destruction” coupled with its polarity, the need to reinvent.

The three questions addressed:

1. What additional theories of change might be helpful to Transition Design?
2. How do we educate designers for new postures, temperaments and mindsets?
3. What should the relation between Transition Design and traditional for-profit business be?

Theories of Change

What additional theories of change might be helpful to Transition Design and from how 'far afield' should we be looking for such theories?

A theory of change that aligns in its radicalism with Transition Design and can perhaps fulfill its vision for systems-level societal change that is both scalable and an alternative to linear, cause – and – effect thinking is Solution Focused change theory (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

Similar to the attributes of transition designers, solution focused practitioners “apply a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of social, economic and natural systems to conceive solutions that leverage the power of interdependency and symbiosis (Irwin, 2014).

Solution focused change theory was initially inspired by the French proverb; plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose – ***the more things change, the more they stay the same***. It concerns itself with the reality that many of our most logical and common sense efforts to change undesirable situations ***fail*** [or the undesirable condition reemerges after some time delay] while other problems seem to dissolve ***magically*** through spontaneous un-orchestrated actions or bizarre reversals of behavior. Sometimes these spontaneous changes are premeditated but most often the solution comes not from an analysis of the problem but through insight into the forces that generate persistence in thinking, action and behavior over time.

From its earliest days solution focused approaches challenged the existing paradigms in psychology, psychoanalysis and the emerging field of organizational behavior. Whereas these fields aligned with mechanistic or analytical approaches to problem identification, the solution approach borrowed from systems thinking and cybernetic models and turned for understanding outside individualistic models to interdependencies among social and emotional units and the kinds of symbiotic outcomes that flow from seeing the unit having greater “power” than the individuals operating as members. Solution focused practitioners formed a deeper appreciation for the paradoxes inherent in open, complex, dynamic and networked (Dorst, 2015) systems that carry enormous homeostatic momentum but seem vulnerable to the discovery of leverage points (Senge, 1990) that, if adjusted, generate a cascade of irreversible change.

Applying this to design, “It is also now widely recognized that design problems are ill-defined, illstructured, or ‘wicked’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973). They are not the same as

the ‘puzzles’ that scientists, mathematicians and other scholars set themselves. They are not problems for which all the necessary information is, or ever can be, available to the problem-solver. They are therefore not susceptible to exhaustive analysis, and there can never be a guarantee that ‘correct’ solutions can be found for them. In this context a *solution-focused strategy is clearly preferable to a problem-focused one*: it will always be possible to go on analyzing ‘the problem’, but the designer’s task is to produce ‘the solution’. (Karjalainen, n.d.)

Therefore, with solution focused change, there is real opportunity for transition design practitioners to borrow from a 50+ year tradition of unconventional, tactically creative, systemically grounded practice that has entered a variety of professional practice areas such as brief therapy, appreciative inquiry, nudge theory and socio-technical regime theory.

Transition design is calling for “sweeping changes at every level of society” (Irwin, 2015) The theories of change from which transition design bases its choices for engagement and interaction must reshape designer’s temperaments, mindsets, postures and perhaps their entire set assumptions with respect to dynamics of change and about change itself.

Question:

How do we educate and prepare designers for new postures and temperaments?

As Irwin, et al recognize “our individual and collective mindsets represent the beliefs, values, assumptions and expectations that are formed by our individual experiences, cultural norms [and biases], religious / spiritual beliefs and the socio-economic and political paradigms to which we subscribe” (Capra 1997, Kearny 1984, Clarke 2002)

So where does one begin to look for examples of how to change temperament, mindset and posture that might lead transition designers towards a more holistic worldview that can inform new, more collaborative and responsible postures for interaction?

Let’s begin this part of the quest first with a poet and then with a scientist of behavior.

John Keats was 22 years old when he coined the term ‘Negative Capability’. He described negative capability as a state (mindset) in which a person; ‘is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’. (Keats, 1970: 43.)

In a period of intense exploration and speculation, he coined the phrase in a sequence of attempts to describe the 'prime essential' of a poet (Muir, 1958: 107). (French, Simpson, & Harvey, 2001) Before settling on Negative Capability Keats ran a series of thought experiments where he considered a variety of alternatives including; skepticism, pessimism, Wordsworthian humanitarianism, disinterestedness, humility and the capability of submission.

What Keats was trying to uncover and reveal was a temperament, a way of being in the world, perhaps what many call a world view, that might give rise to a "poetic imagination" (Bate, 1964, chapter x; Caldwell, 1972: 5). He may also be describing a transition state, a position that allows one to navigate the 'as is' conditions of reality without leaping to a 'to be' condition that simply restores, in absence of a requisite imaginative capacity, the previous conditions one hoped to alleviate.

As researchers have gone on to propose, Negative Capability seems to suggest a peculiarly human capacity for 'containment': that is, the capacity to live with and to tolerate ambiguity and paradox, and to 'remain content with half knowledge' (Ward, 1963, p. 161), 'to tolerate anxiety and fear, to stay in the place of uncertainty in order to allow for the emergence of new thoughts or perceptions' (Eisold, 2000: 65).

It implies the capacity to engage in a non-defensive way with change, without being overwhelmed by the ever-present pressure merely to react and / or make judgments and decisions that may be oppositional to the desired or preferred state. A posture of waiting to see rather than leaping to action.

It also indicates empathy and even a certain flexibility of character, the ability 'to tolerate a loss of self and a loss of rationality by trusting in the capacity to recreate oneself in another character or another environment' (Hutter, 1982: 305).

Bridgewater focuses explicitly on this openness and capacity for identification with the 'other': By 'negative capability' Keats meant the lack of personal identity, of preconceived certainty, which he believed to mark all great poets. It was necessary, Keats believed, for the poet to be, above all, open to impressions, sensations or whatever, which means that the 'camelion' (chameleon) poet is forever changing his/her ideas. (1999: xv.) (French et al., 2001).

Continuing with the theme of educating or cultivating a Transition Design mindset and posture the work of Murray Bowen, in the family and organizational systems tradition, introduces the notion of emotional process and differentiation of self.

Bowen began his professional career as psychoanalyst exploring human problems through a lens of personality. Over time, in his work with schizophrenics and their families, he began to see human problems through the lens of evolutionary theory, systems thinking and patterns of behavior. As social animals, he observed that we are more like colonies of insects or herds of mammals, influenced and shaped by complex social forces of the group that evolve over time to create stability but also creating varying degrees of 'dis-ease' as change brings perturbations and unpredictability.

The term emotional system refers to any group or collection of people (think in terms of colonies, herds, troops, swarms, nests, tribes, prides, etc.) that have developed *emotional interdependencies* to the point where the resulting system through which the parts are connected (administratively, physically or emotionally) has produced its own principles of organization. This profound interconnectedness tends to influence the functioning of the various members more than any individual components tend to influence the functioning of the whole.

Not to be confused with lone wolf notions of autonomy, individuation or independence, differentiation of self refers to one's capacity to maintain a non-anxious presence in midst of anxious systems and to take maximum responsibility for one's own destiny and well-being.

Differentiation of self therefore may be one of the keys, along with Negative Capability, to engaging and 'way-finding' (Holt, 2009) through societal level, system wide transitions that are inherently resistant to change, or stuck in emotional processes that are failing to evolve in the face of crisis (Friedman, 1991).

One example of emotional process that Transition Designers must understand is the paradox of resistance that Solution Focused change theory also addresses.

There are remarkable similarities in change efforts of any kind whether it be leaders trying to change followers, parents trying to change children, teachers trying to motivate engagement or a spouse trying to change a partners habits. In all cases the "motivators" behave as though their followers do not know what is good for them and would never change if not for their genuine efforts to offer guidance, insight or advice. In the case of leaders they often conclude that if followers did not respond or change it is because they as leaders simply did not try hard enough. Almost universally, the "driver" of change responds to the lack of change by trying harder to push, pull, tug, kick, shove, threaten, convince, arm-twist, charm, entice, cajole, seduce, induce guilt, shout louder or be more eloquent. The resulting treadmill of trying harder is usually energized by an absolute belief in the power of the word. These efforts have been

shown over and over again to not only fail but to be paradoxically converted into forces that stabilize and reinforce the status quo.

The resulting polarity results in leaders, parents, teachers, or in this case designers, invoking a charismatic style or invoking a consensus building approach. Either end of the continuum dilutes the designer's differentiation by either compelling them to act as an independent, charismatic, over-functioning expert and enforcing change or as an immersed, opinion softened, consensus builder with muted leverage but kind intentions.

The theory of differentiation and an understanding of emotional processes suggests that systems grow, evolve and change when the "leader" stays connected, resists cutting off to follow an independent course and defines goals and aspirations clearly enough that system – the emotional unit – changes its set point in response to that clarity.

Therefore the opportunity within the developmental phases of cultivating transition designers is to "teach" designers about how emotional units, entangled and complex, function over time within human and non-human systems and how to develop approaches, strategies and tactics to influence those systems without triggering resistance or sabotage. The required and necessary re-skilling and re-educational emphasis is captured to some degree in Irwin's Characteristics of a New Ethos (Irwin, *Figure 8. Characteristics of a new ethos*) but these must be reinforced as concepts with specific curriculum embedded in a natural systems posture with a mindset of 'negative capability' and an understanding of emotional process.

A tall order indeed, but necessary if the status quo is to be changed.

Question:

What should the relation between Transition Design and traditional for-profit business be? What is the role of the Transition Designer within such organizations?

As a current change management designer within traditional businesses I see the role of the Transition Designer being most effectively leveraged when the postures and mindsets articulated above are internalized as deeply as traditional design skills and capabilities.

The critical awareness is that the self-preserving and self-sealing “herding instinct” in corporations is enormous. Schon describes it as a tension between espoused theory (*of course we want the environment to be sustainable!*) and theories in use (*let our competitors go first*) (Schön, 1987). Defensive routines (Argyris & Schon, 1974) abound and executives are not generally open to having contradictions revealed when embarrassment is in play.

Corporate culture and identity “programs” (togetherness forces) also tend to create halo effects (Rosenzweig, 2014) of one sort or another resulting in a tightly packed emotional system that is controlled (risk managed) and emotionally reactive (“I don’t want any surprises!”) when under threat. Transition designers will have to tread lightly across the landscape – regime – niche continuum (Berkhout, Smith, & Stirling, 2004), keeping in mind that symptomatic solutions with short-term payback but long-term reinforcement will generally prevail (Senge, 2014).

The distinction between exploration and exploitation also plays strongly into the challenges faced by introducing a *radically new vision* into traditional organizations.

“Both activities (*exploration and exploitation*) create value and are critical to the success of the organization. An organization that is dedicated to exploration cannot sustain for long unless it obtains funding necessary to sustain further exploration. Organizations that move from the initial explorative phase into exploitation may last longer, however it is nearly impossible to continue exploiting the same amount of knowledge forever. Most companies tend to become comfortable with the administration of the business and never go back to the original mystery finding and solving process.” (Karjalainen, n.d.) Laura Mata García, IDBM papers vol 2

Designers traditionally function best in the exploration phase and must be mindful that the exploitation phase appears adaptable when in fact it may be highly rigid. Roger

Martin (Martin, 2009) and others argue that design thinking enables companies to be creative, innovative and ultimately boost their competitive advantage since they will be able to design better products and services with a user-centered approach. Many attempts to “standardize” design have been made particularly in the 1960s, during the “design methods” movement and all of them have failed (Karjalainen, n.d.) (Koskinen et al. 2011).

So, transition designers beware...eyes wide open!

The antidote for the newly emerging Transition Designer is a continual investment in natural and living systems “education” (a demanding parallel education to design itself) and a commitment to a persistent embracing of a posture and mindset that reinforces – in self, others and systems – self-differentiation, negative capability, resilience, adaptive capacity, integrity and above all, humility.

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