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Whole Systems Design
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Project Learning Analysis

For my Application Project I assumed the role of a meta-designer and designed a design course. The course was an accredited class for Spring Quarter 2001 at Fairhaven College, an alternative Liberal Arts school that is a component of Western Washington University. The presentation of this course was, for me, the culmination of seven consecutive years of intensive academic learning in a newly emerging field – Ecovillage Design. For years I had been developing in my head all the particulars I would include when I finally had a chance to present this material, and so when the opportunity finally arose I methodically wrote up a course description and a syllabus for a class entitled “Ecovillage Design.”

Now, the term “Ecovillage Design” has much semantic appeal: many different people have many different opinions about what exactly an Ecovillage could be, and none of them may ever reach consensus. This ambiguity, this semantic appeal, quickly attracted a full class roster that had to be expanded beyond the desired 12 to include 16; others had to wait until next time. But the ambiguity also quickly presented a design challenge for it became readily apparent that we weren’t just thinking and talking about “Ecovillage Design” but something much larger in which both “ecovillage” and “design” are embedded. This something larger, this greater whole, could be summarized as “designing our ideal sustainable living situation for ourselves.” Since this more inclusive and authentic (i.e. closer to the heart of the students) title would be awkward in a course catalog, it’s probably best that we started with “Ecovillage Design” – though next time the course will be called something different, maybe something like “Introduction to Sustainable Community Design.”

No matter what the title, this subject matter is *vast*, easily accommodating a 4-year degree. A further design challenge arose in trying to squeeze all the essential principles into a short, 10-week span. The proposed syllabus quickly fell by the wayside and I found myself improvising each new week depending on and responding to what had transpired the week before. (We met every Friday from 2-5). I was committed primarily to the Group Design Process (GDP) and I explicitly wrote in the course description that the class would be *process*-oriented rather than *goal*-oriented. But process by itself was somewhat empty and ethereal. There was a real site to work on; there were a variety of personal motivations and desired learning outcomes. Some of the students wanted to see real tangible results! So I attempted to functionally mix a little bit of everything, coherently organizing such wide ranging topics and exercises as: community growing, settlement planning and human geography, permaculture, natural building and architecture, a slide-show tour of the world’s best ecovillage models,

Taoism, organic gardening, evolutionary biology, surveying, site analysis and map making, applied holistic and earth-based spirituality, drumming, singing and music, potlucks, ecohamlet design, Gaia University, CAD programming and GIS, hydrology, geology, ecology, Feng Shui, traditional villages, evolution of consciousness, visualization exercises, etc....and of course the GDP. Then everyone could get a piece of what they wanted – or so I thought!

Since in my mind, as the meta-designer, I had an over-arching logical pattern and purpose for rapidly introducing all these components into the successive unfoldment of a 10-week quarter, it all made sense to me; but by the sixth week ‘chaos’ arose amongst the class. One of the students blithely asked, “What exactly is it we’re talking about?” Most of the students were happily going along with my initiations, and I was doing my best at explaining the reasons behind my actions, but divisiveness soon appeared. Some students wanted to concentrate on the site design work while others were more interested in the theoretical underpinnings. And of course, I wanted to complete the GDP we had started. So much to do and so little time left at the midpoint of this introductory 3-credit class! I urgently solicited feedback to evaluate where the class-as-a-whole was situated. I even threw in a pop quiz to evaluate what had been learned. In response to the feedback, I decided to seek a greater unity, an integration, and so I proposed strategies for taking the chaos to a new level of refined order. After openly communicating this dilemma to the class in a weekly Facilitator Feedback memo, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that at the next session the class as a whole was able to organize *itself* so as to manifest this greater unity. That was a beauty to witness and participate in.

Yet that was my intention from the start: to create a self-organizing, autopoietic living system. As the meta-designer, I defined the teleology and epistemology, I provided the proto-structure, initial stimuli and direction, and then hoped to step back and see the class take on a life of its own. On occasion I repeated that, “I am most successful as a facilitator when I can design myself out of the design process,” meaning that I preferred to assume the role of evaluative observer, witnessing the class do the real work by themselves. This position proved somewhat idealistic for *this* particular class, considering it was our first run and considering most of the students were just beginning their inquiry into ‘ecovillage’ and ‘design;’ but the intention was there, and it was most satisfying to see eager young people take up the challenge and do the best they could. I am quite certain that if I could guide a group of students through a full 4-year degree process (or maybe less), I could create a true self-organizing, autopoietic, living system capable of assuming a life of its own. The class would then be able to take off and land somewhere and be competent to create an “ideal sustainable living situation for themselves.”

This is the key: this is the nugget: this is the principle that is too often overlooked: truly sustainable – that is, able to be continued into the indefinite future – living situations must be *living systems*, modeled upon the organic living systems of Nature. Why waste time trying to

rehabilitate and repair the mechanical systems we have built to live in? – systems like steel towers, coded standard suburban houses, and especially the droning cities? As mechanical systems they are subject to entropy, so their operation will eventually malfunction; their pattern cannot be continued indefinitely. Better to tear them down, deconstruct, and create living systems in their place: systems that evolve organically, systems that are self-organizing, self-maintaining, and self-correcting, systems that are wholly integrated into the greater Nature of which they are a part. The most optimum scale around which to work to realize these goals, and to ensure healthy human development, is the ‘village,’ as has been demonstrated by countless traditional villages throughout the world over millennia.

At least that is the thesis I was presenting to the students; and so we speak about “Ecovillage Design.”

But the village is a complexity of scale that needs to be grown into; it can’t be ‘built’ all at once. It starts with 12-16 conscious people designing their living situation together, as a coherent, well-meaning whole, fully informed and contagious, resplendent and fertile. Then the village can grow out from this embryonic stage, organically.

At least that is what I was attempting to demonstrate to the students. In that regard, this first presentation of an “Ecovillage Design” course could be a prelude to something larger, something grand, something that Gaia herself could be proud of.

If it’s not too pretentious or overly-ambitious, I want to be a teacher of teachers and seed the world with my students.

This quarter’s transforming learning experience was a big step in realizing my ideal living situation...