

Learning like a forest

Adapting, creating and evolving together

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I LIVE on top of a mountain on the edge of Lamington National Park, the largest protected subtropical rainforest in the world. This place is on the edge of the Gold Coast hinterland in the Border Ranges. It's also on the edge of the McPherson Overlap where the southern tip of Queensland's tropical rainforests meets the northern reach of Australia's southern temperate forests. It's one almighty edge up here and that's why it's one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. When ecological edges meet, expect extraordinary relationships, mind-blowing diversity and loads of novelty as ecosystems and species connect, interact and evolve in unpredictable ways. That's why this place teems with life.

It epitomises the community of life in fact. This is a thriving, adapting, regenerating, evolving, ferocious, gigantic system without a single commanding leader. There are no managers, controllers or strategists here. The flow of sunlight energy drives the ancient carbon cycle that connects the soil, air and water cycles which support life on this magnificent edge which – if you shift your perspective for a moment – is ultimately just one tiny system within the enormous living system of the blue planet, Earth. Described in 1979 by scientist James Lovelock in *Gaia: A new look at life on earth* (Oxford University Press), as a self-organising, self-correcting, ever-evolving, complex and interconnected living system, Earth is the only planet we know of in the universe that supports life. Thanks to Lovelock and a host of other ecological and systems scientists we are now recognising that the earth is not a machine we can drive and control but an infinitely complex, interconnected living system within which humans are just one small thread.

Mind you, in the last two hundred years since the invention of the steam engine, we've been an immensely powerful thread. It is clear now that our hyper-industrialised, energy-guzzling, super-consumptive lifestyles are altering the very fabric of the life support systems on Earth including the atmosphere, the oceans, the flow of sunlight energy, the water, soil and air cycles, and biodiversity. As a result,

we're now bumping up against an array of interconnected, complex, 'wicked' problems in the ecological, social, economic and political spheres. That's what happens if you're under the illusion you are the boss of the earth and can indefinitely plunder her resources and pollute with impunity. Eventually you will hit limits because you cannot grow eternally within a finite system.

Here on the edge of Lamington National Park, we're increasingly aware that our human community is a living system too and that our overlapping social edges, like the ecological ones, support marvellous diversity, creativity and fascinating relationships as they intersect. Our community grows, seeds, produces, entangles, disentangles, withers, collapses and regenerates in continuing ways just like the rainforest that surrounds us. Over the years I have come to realise that communities, especially my own home community, don't depend on any one organiser to make them work. There is room for all to contribute to this humming, buzzing life if we listen carefully, look closely, learn deeply, care greatly and see ourselves as part of a living system. At the heart of this process I believe, is our ability to learn in and from action, together, like a forest.

That's why I'm increasingly concerned by government-led community consultation about community futures. On the surface it sounds like a worthy idea and it has now been embedded within the Queensland State Government's *Local Government Act 2009* as Community Planning, which directs councils throughout the state to develop long-term community visions and plans in consultation with their communities. But I have two concerns with this. One is about the very limited capacity of consultation to actually engage people and generate creative, visionary thinking, dialogue and learning about our collective future. And the other is the political paradox in Queensland (and indeed the rest of Australia) where state government constitutionally oversees local government and can overrule the needs, desires and aspirations of local communities and councils and impose its will upon the people, thereby rendering any previous consultation obsolete.

As we come to better understand the interesting times we now live in by bumping up against that array of systems-based, interconnected, wicked problems, described by Canadian political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon as 'tectonic stresses' in *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization* (Text Publishing, 2007), I have a feeling that government-controlled community consultation and its worthy rhetoric and glossy brochures is not going to cut it. Albert Einstein was onto things all those years ago when he said that the level of thinking which created significant problems was not the level of thinking required to solve them. He was likely referring to the fact that our world is a very large, complex, unpredictable system made up of many overlapping, interconnected, smaller systems and if we want to do more than continually create big problems out of one-track, linear, mechanistic thinking then we need to bring many minds, many ideas, much creativity and great wisdom together when we think about and act in the world.

IN THESE INTERESTING times we need to create the conditions for joined up thinking that brings a diversity of people, organisations and ideas to the table. We need to engage in ongoing, collective dialogue and adaptive co-learning to 'solve for pattern' – Wendell Berry's marvellous concept about designing integrated, multi-faceted solutions which address multiple, systemic problems by placing 'health for all' at their core. Berry, a farmer, poet and teacher suggests, for example, that sustainable local food and farming has the potential to address many serious issues simultaneously including soil and water health, carbon storage and greenhouse gas reduction, worker health and safety, productivity and yield, water conservation, biodiversity, food nutrition and local economic prosperity. Berry's sustainable agriculture is more than a short-term linear fix. It is an evolving, systems-based approach to some of the biggest issues of our time. It also requires more than top-down leadership to implement. It's a place-based, localised and evolving framework, philosophy and act of creativity arising from the grassroots.

These are perhaps, unusual ideas and no doubt, a big ask particularly for governments enmeshed in command and control ideology and practice. How do we bring a diversity of people, organisations and ideas to the table to dialogue and design integrated, ethical, systems-based solutions for complex problems? How do we connect layers of government with layers of community to create wise visions and ongoing adaptive co-learning in a time of emerging climate, energy, political and economic crisis? Thankfully if we look carefully within our communities, we can already find emerging examples of just such work.

On the Gold Coast for example, the health and wellbeing of young children in the early years between birth and eight years old, is seen by many non-government organisations, government agencies, community workers, general practices, doctors, nurses, childcare workers, educators and health care specialists as a priority for the long-term sustainability and functionality of this community. Picking up on international research that identifies early years health and wellbeing as a crucial component of social sustainability, two years ago the multi-sectoral gr8 START early years program was seeded by the Gold Coast Primary Care Partnership Council with funding from the Queensland Government's Connecting Healthcare in Communities (CHIC) program. It started small and with the help of a project coordinator and fledgling advisory group, ran a short pilot program with a cluster of general practices to distribute book packs of information about early literacy, family bonding and early childhood developmental milestones to parents.

Two years down the track the gr8 START team recognises that while the distribution of information is a good start and is expanding the book packs to include developmental checklists and referral pathways, its real strength lies in the advisory group. This is a collaborative, multi-sector partnership that meets each month and communicates more regularly online, to deepen their knowledge of each participant's work and create synergies and greater coherence between services

across the early years landscape in this region. The more the advisory group connects members' diverse edges and creates a common language and understanding about early years health and wellbeing, the more it develops meaningful conversation, joined up thinking and systems-based solutions that ripple out to families and children in the Gold Coast region. Collective learning is now emerging within the group in ways that will continue to underpin the evolution of their work in this field in highly significant ways.

This process has taken time. It requires a core group to keep the faith and coordinate the basics. There are times when there is no clear pathway forward and people need to sit tight in fuzziness for a while until clearer perspectives and collective wisdom arise. This is not a process that fits tight timelines or regulatory tick boxes with efficient consultative outputs. It's iterative and sometimes intuitive. It requires alignment with an overarching intention. Indeed, it requires the collective design of an overarching intention, in this case the evidence-based understanding that the health and wellbeing of children is essential to a healthy society and that this can be progressed with a more coherent, well-connected, collaborative service sector. Such alignment then allows diverse organisations and people to get on with what they do well while simultaneously supporting a higher, collective intention.

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING RESEARCHER and author Peter Senge suggests it is time to take off our mechanic/driver/controller glasses which see the world as linear, simple, controllable and fixable with answers lying in the hands of just a few hero leaders. Senge suggests that organisations and communities are like gardens – complex, self-organising, organic and evolving organisms which contain many leaders, much knowledge, multiple connections and relationships, and many layers of innovation and creativity. He believes our most important task is to become gardeners who can find, support and nurture local leaders, knowledge, connections, relationships, innovation and creativity.

If we become the community gardeners of Senge's framework I think we will also become curious learners who look to our communities of place and practice as evolving sites of learning and renewal. We will no longer see them as 'empty vessels' that need 'the right' information poured into them or as machines that need fixing. Within this paradigm of community and learning we have an opportunity to change our lens on the world from one of mechanical control to one of co-learning in and from complexity.

One of my favourite words in the English language is 'desireline'. It comes from the landscaping fraternity and describes the informal pathways pedestrians make when they step off concrete footpaths and walk across lawns and grass. They are the routes that people take or make based on their needs and desires to get somewhere via a shorter or perhaps more scenic path and they tend to become visible over time as more feet walk them across the ground.

Within our communities, I believe there are social desirelines which connect ideas, knowledge, needs and aspirations with people, projects, organisations and businesses. If our communities are already living systems and sites of learning and innovation, then one of the most important jobs of local and state governments in particular, in their quest to enable long-term community visioning and planning, is to find those community desirelines and support their ongoing evolution because these represent what our communities most value at their core. It is important for them to grow and function alongside the more formal structures of governance too, though if we are to be community gardeners we must be careful not to put up 'keep off the lawn' signs or concrete over desirelines with so many layers of bureaucracy and structure that they become too rigid and uncomfortable to be useful to community any more.

Economic development researcher and practitioner Ernesto Sirolli discusses a framework in *Ripples from the Zambezi* (New Society Publishers, 1999) that aligns well with our metaphor of the community as a garden. Called 'enterprise facilitation', Sirolli's framework focuses on the development of local economies and small to medium enterprises that are fuelled by people's passions and aspirations. Economic development officers are reinvented as enterprise facilitators – community-based networkers whose job involves doing nothing until people come to them with their business aspirations. Then their role is to listen deeply to understand those aspirations and find the connections, information, expertise and leadership within the community to enable those aspirations to evolve into thriving, meaningful business enterprises.

In suggesting a learning foundation for community visioning, planning and organising we can turn Sirolli's enterprise facilitators into learning facilitators; people who are great listeners, observers and connectors. People who have the ability to go into communities to find the local leaders, innovators, desirelines and needs and then start to connect them up. Facilitators with the skills to help people and organisations reflect upon and tell their stories, then amplify those stories across communities so others can be inspired and activated and the learnings made contagious. Learning facilitators also have the capacity to connect the grassroots with more formal governance structures so that real partnerships can be born between government and community.

IN THE SCENIC Rim region, this type of community/council co-learning and connectivity is just beginning to re-emerge, three years after the upheaval of the State-driven local government amalgamation process that created the Scenic Rim Regional Council in 2008. Thanks to the wisdom of many community leaders across the region there is now a collective recognition that it is the natural landscapes, relatively healthy ecosystems, community vitality, indigenous culture and rural

heritage that underpin the future here. An overarching intention created between community and council to protect and nourish these strengths has been crafted and Council is supporting cross-sectoral, cross-community conversations that allow the people and organisations of the Scenic Rim to meet, talk, build relationships, generate ideas, undertake innovative pilot programs and begin designing their living regional 'garden' into the future. The real value of this work is already being tested as Council, communities, businesses and grassroots organisations rally together to oppose the onslaught of State Government sanctioned coal mining and coal seam gas development in the region. The people of the region are entering a time of onground, real life learning to protect their forests, waterways, soils and communities and only time will tell how this emergent solidarity fares.

Internationally-recognised adult educator Michael Newman in his provocative article about the role of 'good' adult education called 'Throwing out the balance with the bathwater' (2006), suggests that it is the *process* of learning that requires much of our attention and that we need to engage in 'process with attitude'. He says, 'We should encourage ourselves and others to defy anyone laying out an unwanted future for us...we should teach and learn how to wrest our lives away from the control of others and take charge of our own moment. I am suggesting that we teach and learn how to be fully human, to use Carl Rogers' phrase; and how to be free, to use a word given the sense I want in it by the life and example of Nelson Mandela'. Newman argues that it is entirely possible for us to learn to think clearly and imaginatively and to act and act wisely.

SOMETHING IMPORTANT NEEDS to change if we are to craft meaningful, wise futures for ourselves and our communities. We need and deserve more than a one-size-fits-all, top down, linear vision. Our communities are already well-stocked with effective local leaders, teachers and visionaries. They are already home to many effective, inspiring, locally-relevant innovations. These programs, organisations, enterprises and people arise from the ground up to meet the needs and aspirations of local areas in meaningful, authentic and appropriate ways.

If we want to support whole-of-community visioning and future making we can do so in low risk, cost effective ways simply by collaborating and partnering with the innovators already living deeply connected lives. We can learn from them and help make their stories accessible and contagious. We can celebrate them and enable their work to grow and overlap and evolve. In doing that work we help community visions expand in ways that work and work from the inside out rather than being imposed from above.

I would like to suggest the conditions that support people, communities and governments to learn like a forest – as adaptive, attentive, creative, joined-up, systems thinkers – are upon us right here, right now. Like the propensity of life to

turn on a sixpence and our inbuilt human capacity for relationship, this can happen in an instant if we shift our perspective to the local level, to the learning level, to the recognition that our communities are small living systems within the enormous living system that is the blue planet. The only one we know of in the universe that supports life.

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