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Presentation to Agents in the Anthropocene: Trans/disciplinary Practices in Art and Design Education Today
The Master of Education in Arts, Piet Zwart Institute,

Making Our Futures: Accidental Death of the Planet*

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the absurdity of designing and delivering curriculum in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) at a time of ecological systems collapse. The aim is to question contemporary responses in Higher Education to the major issues facing our species, like Climate Change and the Sixth Extinction, from an arts-led, practice-based perspective in the UK and some other countries. It considers most present initiatives to be woefully inadequate in meeting such 'wicked problems', as solution-led, techno-fix, problem-based learning often adds to social psychosis by generating a 'double bind'. However, this psychological and psychosocial paradox may reveal both the forms of destruction and creation as the art of survival.

The text reflects on how we might develop an ecological pedagogy or 'contra dogma' for 'capable futures' that addresses transformative challenges (Haley 2008). And it asks, how might we best prepare our students to reduce vulnerability and increase their adaptability for resilience? It further asks, how might we steer our universities and art schools away from the nihilistic philosophies of neo-liberalism to become 'life support systems' (Haley 2013)?

It is based on the development of an arts initiative, 'Making Our Futures' (MOF) that started in 2006 as a master class at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and is now embedded into the Masters programme and LiFE (Living in Future Ecologies) research group at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University (Haley 2017). In October 2016, LiFE published '*Fruitful Futures: Imagining Pomona*', a book that challenged the tyranny of spatial planning and urban development to offer imaginative life-enhancing methods of 'designing regenerative cultures' (Cocchiarella, Haley, Vargas 2016. Wahl 2016). This approach specifically draws upon the concepts and practices of 'the embodied mind', 'Transdisciplinarity', 'Post-disciplinarity', 'Panarchy' and 'Trickster' (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Nicolescu 2002, Harrisons 2008, Gunderson and Holling 2002, Hyde 2008).

Delivered as a dialogical provocation, the presentation requires PowerPoint projection facilities, a dark sense of humour, and a passion for environmental and social justice. It addresses the Symposium Theme, 'Trans-disciplinary research and co-operations'.

- (Fo 1987)

PRESENTATION

This presentation comes in two parts. The first part is a description of 'Making Our Futures', an Art and Design programme that I have developed since 2007. The second part considers the absurdity of delivering such a programme, and makes oblique reference to Theatre of the Absurd through the play, 'Accidental Death of an Anarchist' (1970) by Dario Fo.

PART ONE

The concept of 'Making Our Futures' developed from my belief that, as well as contributing to knowledge, **art has the potential to shift the way we think** (Bohm, 2008), but to do this it has to operate on an equal, 'post-disciplinary' basis (Mayer-Harrison & Harrison, 2008). Putting this idea into practice drove my development of '**Question-Based Learning**' (Haley, 2008).

The convergence of art and design cultures revealed formal and informal modes of learning that sometimes clashed, but through persistence, could be resolved through **non-formal learning** that emerged from a common engagement. This project gave students the capabilities to explore their unknown, uncertain and indeterminate futures, to discover their own capacity for resilience and adaptability.

The Programmes

Previous MOF programmes in Spain, China and Taiwan focused on local and global issues; river ecology and urban development, sea level rise, interdisciplinarity, 'the Art of Sustainable Living', 'Material Culture/Asking the Right Questions', 'Resilience', 'Post-urbanism', and 'City Living/Living Living Cities'. Each intensive programme of lectures, seminars, workshops and project facilitation focused on a sequence of propositions, some fundamental questions, information, guidance **and more questions**.

For the 2015 MA unit at MMU, I included workshops from members of staff from other disciplines, to introduce '**Global Citizens, Global Learners**', '**Education for Sustainable Living**', and '**Indigenous knowledge as Art**'. Also, within the 2015 Manchester Festival of Social Sciences, I initiated with other colleagues *Walkabout the City?* (Haley et al 2016), an event comprised of two walks, for thirty multi-sector participants, staff and students from all Faculties. The walks started with one key question, '**How is the city a place to protect and nurture life support systems now and for the future?**' (Prowse & Vargas, 2015). The city itself prompted questions of sustainability and the most pressing social, cultural and environmental issues of our time. Visiting the **Biospheric Foundation**, an intensive urban farm project created by MMU PhD student, Vincent Walsh, prompted discussion about the viability of urban food production. As a psychogeographic convergence of diverse thinking and physical practice, this project saw the emergence of Transdisciplinary

Knowledge being generated by participants from many disciplines and sectors of society. (Nicolescu 2008).

As it happens all the MOF students decided to focus on different aspects of 'waste'. Researching their chosen topics they became the **drivers of their own learning and creativity**, culminating in a day-long presentation of their work at Manchester Museum, where they engaged members of the public and demonstrated their research in:

- *Waste fleeces as a felted growing medium*
- *Linen seed smuggling, concealed in waste linen material*
- *New aesthetics for up-cycled products*

This year, the MOF module evolved into a second unit for the Professional Platforms. The **LiFE** (Living in Future Ecologies) research group provided the context for MOF students and others Masters students to progress their ideas with members of staff experienced in research, academically and professionally.

LiFE was formed in June 2015 as an interdisciplinary group of researchers wanting to critically intervene in the sustainability discourse, create 'capable futures' and innovate the everyday through arts and design practices. It is currently developing projects concerned with:

- 1) industrial scale waste management,
- 2) biodiversity conservation / land management
- 3) urban food production
- 4) future lifestyles
- 5) the circular economy

Students working individually or collectively identified an issue and pursued a project that is related to current LiFE projects. They were supported by members of staff with experience and expertise in many disciplines and sectors. The students acquired LiFE skills and capabilities associated with both theoretical and concrete aspects of research, to invent practical applications, or envision novel futures.

For Manchester European City of Science, last July, the students were invited to 'design-fit' their projects into another walk; this time from the City Centre to **Pomona Island**, between the Bridgewater and Manchester Ship canals.

The walk was inspired by Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit. 21 walkers encountered a cornucopia of paradoxical tales about biodiversity and urban planning, carbon-free air miles, invasive species for healthy living, and old toolkits to design new nature. With LiFE, the students then produced an edited collection of provocative stories to inquire how we may live into the future. The book, **'Fruitful Futures: Imagining Pomona'** was launched at a LiFE Salon, as part of Design Manchester in October 2016.

PART TWO

Written in 1970, *'Accidental Death of an Anarchist'* explores the tension between the real death of a railway worker and the farcical interventions advanced by the authorities to explain how he *fell* from the fourth floor window of the Italian police headquarters. I suggest that a similar situation exists with regard to the absurdity of nations concerning planetary ecocide and Climate Change.

Representing society's highest values, the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals, currently rank what some consider to be the most vital challenges, including Climate Change at 13, 14 and 15, of the 17 Goals (United Nations 2015). The '... goals to transform our world' were selected and prioritised by the largest market research exercise to ever be commissioned; a truly global enterprise, based on popular opinion. Given the current populist trend for anti-intellectualism, was this initiative an expression of true democracy, or a cynical demonstration of neoliberal philosophy?

I stopped using the term 'Sustainable Development' ten years ago, when I realised that Climate Change is a **'Wicked Problem'**. Wicked problems defy solution-led, problem-based approaches as these methods often exacerbate the very situation they try to address. So, educating people to sustain development provides us with a perfect **paradox**, perpetuated by rigid adherence to the disciplinary structures and strictures of Higher Education institutions and Research Councils (Haley 2017).

Sustainable Development is an **oxymoron** – the term doesn't actually mean what it says. To sustain something is to maintain it, so what do we want to maintain? Are we simply sustaining the status quo – life styles and standards of living that we, in the so called 'developed world' enjoy at the expense of others?

Regarding **'development'**, the thing that we insist on sustaining is **growth economics**, MIT systems analyst, Jay Forrester, stated in 1971:

'The world's leaders are correctly fixated on the economic growth as the answer to virtually all problems, but they're pushing with all their might in the wrong direction.' (Meadows 1999 p1)

So, 'Sustainable Development' actually means the very opposite to what we want it to mean.

Despite our compelling societal myths to the contrary, the world and most things in it are beyond our control. We must learn to expect the unexpected, the uncertain, the indeterminate. To do so is to prepare for such eventualities and be **ecologically resilient**.

The editors of '*Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*', Gunderson & Holling write:

'That interplay between stabilizing and destabilizing properties is at the heart of present issues of development and the environment – global change, biodiversity loss, ecosystem restoration, and sustainable development.

Exclusive emphasis on ... engineering resilience, reinforces the dangerous myth that the variability of natural systems can be effectively controlled, that the consequences are predictable, and that sustained maximum production is an attainable and sustainable goal...(However) The very success of limiting variability of a target leads to the unperceived shrinkage of stability domains. As ecosystem resilience is lost, the system becomes more vulnerable to external shocks that previously could be absorbed.' (Holling & Gunderson 2002 p 28)

Of course resilience is both pattern and process. And like ecology and art it is an emergent phenomena. It is not a purposive, solution-led, problem-based form or an object that can be fixed. It's a **dynamic, indeterminate 'quality'**. The capacity to withstand disturbance is not just a question of how long the status quo can be maintained, but how we might emerge in a new world.

The curriculum, or the delivery of formal education has been the most contentious and intractable element for advancing ESD. This is where disciplinary dogma closes the door to meaningful adaptability.

Fatigue is growing for the once popular mantras of inter-disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, to approach our greatest challenges in an integrated way. And the threat of 'Austerity' calls the clarion of retreat back to the presumed safety of the disciplinary silos.

Maybe Education for Sustainable Development in Higher Education needs to contest the precepts and values instigated by governments, international organisations and global corporations? But how may academia initiate such an epistemological revolution? The paradox of sustainable development gives way to a double bind, or 'Catch 22' situation.

The crux of a **double bind** is two contradictory requirements, each on different levels of reason, which can be neither discounted nor avoided. This leaves the person torn both ways, so that whichever request they try to meet, the other request cannot be met. The demands of Sustainable Development would suggest such a cognitive disjuncture exists in global society, so when this is passed down to education the situation is compounded by the diktats of the Government, the authority of the institution, the dogmas of the disciplines, the experience of the staff and the intuitions of the students. Psychologically, such disjuncture causes neurosis.

Neurosis is a distorted way of perceiving the world and oneself. This is controlled by compulsive needs and desires rather than by a genuine interest in the world. It comes down to the fact that most people are too concerned with their own neuroses to be able to care about Climate Change and its consequences. Their attitudes toward others and their environment are governed by their own neurotic demands and reactions (Horney 1950 p 22). In extreme circumstances, such **societal neurosis** may lead to delusional belief systems and impairments in social cognition; a form of schizophrenia or **cultural psychosis**.

This condition is perpetuated as a positive feedback loop, or 'vicious circle' of the double bind mentioned before. Despite the ground-breaking work and passionate attempts by those promoting and delivering ESD, we find ourselves locked into **institutional and disciplinary absurdity** of the most profoundly dangerous kind. **Reality gives way to the new normal**, with no escape other than the absurd, 'accidental death' of ecosystemic life on Earth (Fo 1987).

Given the gravity of the situation, let us now consider the potential for '**undisciplinarity**', so that students may become ecologically resilient for adaptation (Haley2017). This idea is not a solution, but a means of generating new questions to provoke genuine, meaningful action from universities to transform society at large. Indeed, this may be the point at which the creative arts are valued most, because traditional research methods, alone, inadequately address these issues. The creative arts, potentially, offer the '**leverage points**' (Meadows 1999) to provide the transition from order to disorder, thesis to antithesis, and structure to process that may evolve as organisation, synthesis and pattern for a critically robust Curriculum.

The Romanian physicist, Basarab Nicolescu, provides the three postulates for the founding of transdisciplinary methodology:

1. There are in Nature and in our knowledge of Nature, different levels of Reality and, correspondingly, different levels of perception.
2. The passage from one level of Reality to another is insured by the logic of the included middle.
3. The structure of the totality of levels of Reality or perception is a complex structure: every level is what it is because all the levels exist at the same time. (Nicolescu 2008 p. 10)

And at number '2.', the 'included middle' is what we may consider to be "**undisciplinarity**". Without it there is no 'passage from one level of Reality to another.

Indeed, most pleas for multi, inter and transdisciplinary are misunderstood, misguided or high-jacked by continuing the separated disciplines of Cartesian cognition. Despite the rhetoric to the contrary, most universities maintain intransigent hierarchical structures that specifically undermine any genuine attempts at such ways of working. But as the method of delivering ESD is

intrinsically interdisciplinary and the goal is the emergence of Transdisciplinary Knowledge, we find ourselves again in a double bind! How may we transcend the fortified silos of disciplinary dogma?

We need a disciplinary antidote to shift the paradox to a new paradigm. **Undisciplinarity** is, by definition, 'unruly, disorderly, disobedient, badly behaved, obstreperous ... disruptive...', qualities that most universities eradicate from their institutions, discourage in their students and dispel from the disciplines.

Given that this presentation focuses on an educational impasse and an ecological conundrum, it is worth reflecting on how these issues may be resolved. The route of the word 'pedagogy' suggests that education requires a more complex understanding than mere teaching or instruction. It evokes the description of an Ancient Greek slave leading a child pupil by the hand to the teacher's house. It suggests a process and relationship of **informal learning** prior to the delivery of formal education by the teacher. Note that the child was led by the hand, offering support, rather than being pushed. Trust was an essential quality, as was the time spent during the walk from the pupil's house to the teacher's house. This was time devoted to learning life skills, rather than formal disciplinary education.

Now, let us consider the origin of another word of Greek derivation, '**ecology**', or *oikos*. Again, the word *oikos* has a complex set of meanings based on the cosmological design of an Ancient Athenian house. Harmony existed by maintaining the correct system of internal and external interdependencies. 'Fundamental culture' resided in the ecology, or 'the pattern that connect(ed)' the pupil's house and all the houses along the walk to the teacher's house (Morin 2008; Bateson 2000).

Of course, in Higher Education, both Pedagogy and Ecology are regarded as separate disciplines without any reason for linkage. However, if we are to genuinely address Climate Change through universities, then we need to move beyond estates management and ESD to address the core business of HE, **the curriculum**, so maybe the destructive shock of undisciplinarity is what is needed across, between and beyond the curriculum. Then we can reorganise a system of '**Eco-Pedagogy**' (Haley2017).

Developed from Scottish artist, Eduardo Paolozzi's assertion: 'What we need is a new culture in which way problems gives way to capabilities', the concept of '**Capable Futures**' directly challenges engineered resilience, retention of societal status quo, disciplinary dogma and the double bind of Sustainable Development (Paolozzi 1985 p 7). The words say what they mean and mean what they say. Offering practical skills, the term focuses on the future, not on the past, and the plural insists on the evolutionary principle of diversity. Eco-Pedagogy then becomes the means to convey Capable Futures for the transition to a regenerative culture for ecological resilience and adaptation.

Governmental policy and legislation offer important strategies based on the disciplines of material rationality, but they have done little to change the status quo of 'the industrial growth society' and its catastrophic trajectory. It's time for a '**second order**' of thinking and doing – more 'artful', more savvy. As Joseph Beuys pointed out; 'to provoke is to evoke' (Beuys 1990 p 86). And of course, Hyde's assertion that it is 'Trickster' who 'makes this world' (Hyde 2008).

But, instead of thinking of these initiatives as separate or conflicting interests, it may be even more useful to consider resilience as dynamic revolution/resolution – resolving duality – a process emerging from one state to the next. **Together**, disciplinary and undisciplinarity offer Higher Education the ability to meet the **transformative challenges**. We may then see our embodied relationship to our environment and our interdependent engagement with each other as many diverse realities, each pregnant with a potential future (Haley 2017).

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