Innovations in Praxis Article

The Art and Science of 'Escape':

World Building and Other Leaps Towards Transformation

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Abstract

The authors draw from their experience of hosting two virtual design and imagination labs, where we took a deep dive into the evolution of our economic system with a diverse group, and had a profound collective experience imagining possible alternatives that promote wellbeing and flourishing of people and planet. These labs were convened by the David Suzuki Foundation in Turtle Island/Canada during the pandemic. In each Lab, approximately 60 participants were invited from across government, First Nations communities, civil society, academia, and activism. Both the process of inviting, and the lab design and process, were carefully curated with an intention to bring different world views and perspectives to take a deep dive into re-imagining our economic system. As pracademics and systems change practitioners, we reflect on what is required to make visible the underlying conditions (including worldviews, myths, and metaphors) that keep our current systems in place, and what might be needed to free ourselves to imagine alternatives. We refer to this liberation as 'escape' and propose six elements of 'escape' for transformation. The process of unlearning

and releasing ourselves from unhelpful limiting assumptions and worldviews applies to those 'facilitating' these processes of systemic change, as much as it applies to those participating in the labs. This form of collective practice requires constant vigilance, as no single methodology of framework is fit for purpose. We reflect on what this kind of methodological pluralism invites and offers, as we bring together different ways of knowing and different knowledge systems, and re-imagine alternatives that recognise the limitations and impact of our current economic system on people and planet.

Keywords

systemic intervention, methodological pluralism, reflexive futuring, second order cybernetics, dialogue and world building, holding in transition

Introduction

When we agreed to write an editorial for this new section of the journal, *Innovations in Praxis*, we did so with the vision of writing a piece that reflected the invitation to authors. That is, we wanted to write about the relational, messy, and evolving dimensions of praxis and give others the permission to be honest, reflective, and unique. We wanted to share our own understanding of what praxis means, but reflect this through illustration and the sharing of our own experience. We also wanted to show what it means to us to work intentionally with concepts-in-practice. So, as our *innovation in praxis*, we have chosen to focus on how we weave the threads of methodological pluralism in order to take up our role of creating 'escape artists' for transformation. Our role is not one of neutral facilitator, but rather as active and constant scanners of signals for readiness. To illustrate this, we start with a journey down memory lane before we focus on a particular case in point. Through this case, we illustrate six elements of 'escape' for transformation—with a goal of liberating ourselves and others from the world-views that tie (and retie) us to the current system and the unleashing of self-empowered 'escapees' and world builders. We hope you enjoy our story which is offered in the spirit of sharing lessons learnt and reflecting on what it means to innovate in praxis.

Origins—Tracing Our Threads

A linguist and a human geographer walk into a bar... Well actually, it was a cafe in Sydney, Australia, back in 2012. We were both navigating the emerging landscape of systemic practice with deep interest, but also with a healthy shared suspicion of adopting particular methods or frameworks like recipes for a cake. We were wary of the flavour of the month techniques and felt that with a depth of understanding of systemic transformation should come an equal depth of understanding about different methodologies and what they bring, and a breadth of tools and techniques to support the work in any given moment. It was in later conversations and collaborations that we also realised that we shared a

preference for (and academic grounding in) inductive reasoning. As an applied linguist (Megan) and a human geographer (Fiona), we were most comfortable when we could develop concepts and frameworks out of the messiness of place and context, rather than the other way around—imposing theory on context. We shared a deep interest in praxis: taking heuristic frameworks and concepts and testing them in contexts of application, always with the intention of creating the conditions for systems to navigate paths that were more just and equitable; ones which contributed to flourishing of people and planet.

In terms of our earlier origins, writing this editorial prompted a discussion of our 'red threads'—the common themes and connections weaving through from our earlier lives and work. For this, we jump to first person 'I':

Fiona:

> With the benefit of hindsight, I now realise that some of my most formative early experiences occurred against the backdrop of major economic reforms in Australia. I grew up on a remote fourth generation family farm. Our farm had both livestock (sheep and cattle) and cropping and had flourished right up until the late 1980s. Times changed and it was in 1990 that sheep numbers dramatically peaked across Australia. This was followed soon after by the collapse of the "wool stockpile" in 1991—part of an Australian Wool Price Reserve Scheme. This quickly led to financial crisis and the introduction of the "Flock Reduction Program." This is a benign term for what was an industry collapse and a government payment program for farmers to euthanise [shoot] their entire herds of sheep. In this program, farmers across Australia had to destroy over 20 million sheep; animals they had raised and cared for. I was 11 years old at the time. One day, I remember my siblings and I being kept inside the farmhouse by my mother and told to stay away from the sheepyards. We could hear bullets being fired from those nearby yards, and the sounds of trucks moving sheep to a mass burial site dug in the ground. I also remember the devastation of my parents. I recall asking, "Why?" The answer I remember is that it was due to the decisions of someone, somewhere, in a capital city down south, that led to the wool price crash. The visible effects of decisions being made far away from home left an indelible mark on me, more so than I realised at the time.
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> It also taught me two lessons: 1) decisions makers are imperfect, and 2) decisions have lasting impacts and unintended consequences. It is no surprise then that the 'red thread' for my academic career has essentially been exploring the question: "Why do decision makers make the [good or bad] decisions that they do?" It was through my PhD studies on farmer-driven innovation, where I dived deep into decision theory, innovation systems,

knowledge networks, and systems thinking, that I came to realise that decision makers are but one part of a complex whole. It was through my work on climate change that I realised that, while capability building and awareness raising can help decision makers think differently, they are also bound by the conditions and feedback loops of the system they are embedded in. And so the third lesson was that 3) there are no 'easy' answers or quick fixes to the troubling patterns of decision making I was witnessing.

The focus of my work moved from understanding human decision making, to developing skills and practices to influence wider system conditions for deliberation and positive social and environmental transformation, as well as decision makers' abilities to think beyond short term consequences towards new patterns and frames. This was never to decontextualise decisions—I learnt early on how dangerous decisions made far from home could be— but rather to find processes that could open the way to new contexts, content, and wisdom.

I began to understand the invisible threads of justice, power, relationships, and purpose that shaped mindsets and to explore how to value and enable different ways of knowing, being, and doing. I learnt that human brains are knowledge generating systems in their own right, within systems which act upon them. In applying grounded theory and studying grassroots innovation, I learnt of the systemic bias in favour of formal research and 'academic experts' at the expense of the lifelong wisdom and experience of farmers. It became apparent that definitions of 'expert' and 'knowledge' were culturally constructed, historically dynamic, and definitely subjective.

Throughout this roaming exploration, I sought to hold onto multiple realities. In my academic studies, I studied the arts (political and social sciences, geography, English, and history) and also science (biology, ecology, and wildlife management) and grappled with the different paradigms within each. I spent several years working on environmental policy [more seemingly crazy decisions], engaging with decision makers in countries on almost every continent through United Nations processes. To this day, working across many different sectors and systems, I still maintain strong connections to the land and farming, whilst living in the city. And I constantly move between the role of researcher and facilitator and content creator and convenor. I am still very much on a lifelong journey where that lasting question of "why do we decide what we decide—and is there any way to escape our own bounded rationality?" remains at the heart of my work.

Megan:

My fascination with bringing together bodies of knowing and bodies of knowledge—and praxis—began in the 1990s in higher education in South Africa. First as a mainstream academic in applied linguistics, and then working on curriculum transformation in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa. In hindsight for me, the interdisciplinary nature of both education and applied linguistics (my post graduate degrees at that point) gave me licence and latitude to work across disciplinary boundaries. And then there was a ripe field for application in the Medical School at the University of Kwa Zulu Natal (now called the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine). At that point in time, the faculty only admitted 'non-White' students into what was otherwise a predominantly White university. The School had specifically been established to educate doctors to serve in under-served areas of the country. To that end, only students 'of colour' were admitted to the faculty. Half of these students were second language speakers, with up to six first languages comprising the cohort of 120 students admitted each year. The reality was that it offered a classic western-styled Medical curriculum, with a broad introductory first year and two years of anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry crammed into a very full second year, which saw more than half the class failing.

I was teaching Communication and Healthcare to first year students, and increasingly drawn into 'fixing' the 'problem' of under-prepared/disadvantaged/second language students. The assumption was that building academic literacy in second language students would enable them to engage with the curriculum (and curriculum knowledge). The first prototype was a pre-university program, involving staff in an integrated program, intentionally building language skills in the context of selected themes. The curriculum remained essentially unchallenged. At the same time, I was working with an Education Review Group designated by the Faculty Board to look at the structure of the curriculum (and the entire teaching and learning process). This work was fuelled by national exploration around the need to transform knowledge and what it might mean to 'Africanise' the curriculum in the context of the transition to post-Apartheid South Africa.

I had since moved into a full-time role in educational development in the Faculty. It became clear through our deliberations in the Education Review Group that the curriculum was structured in such a way as to continue to marginalise students who spoke other languages, who brought different worldviews and different ways of

knowing, and of engaging with and mapping the world. Rather than preparing students to become lifelong learners (the stated intention) and to serve in under-served areas (the purpose for which the faculty was established), it was perpetuating an unequal and unjust process of education and producing graduates who were no better able to respond to the complexities of unequal health care provision, and many of whom emigrated to the UK and elsewhere on completion. Thus began a process of deconstructing curriculum knowledge and what it might mean for a diverse group of students to engage with that knowledge. We were supported in this radical endeavour by the Vice-Chancellor of the University, who had committed the University to a strategic intent of becoming a learning organisation (influenced by the early work of Peter Senge). Faculties were encouraged to embark on contextualised curriculum transformation—hence the work in the Medical School—and at the same time I was working on a university-wide strategy to become a learning organisation, supported by two of Senge's associates.

The Education Review Group agreed that we had no interest in a 'twin track' curriculum and that it was important to keep the strengths of the current curriculum. At the same time, we recognised that the entire teaching and learning process needed to be transformed to create a learning environment that recognised and worked with diverse languages, knowledges, and lived experience. This required a transformative pedagogy. We co-designed a problem-based curriculum that was also learning-centred and community-based. We agreed that this needed to be an experience for all students and integrated into the four undergraduate years of study. Our first prototype was a 10-week program for first year students organised around the theme of Tuberculosis. The program began with staff and students visiting primary care facilities in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal, travelling in local transport to visit patients suffering from TB. This recoding of the medical curriculum required an unbundling of discipline-specific knowledge in order to make the different dimensions explicit; co-designing a bespoke methodology/pedagogy that incorporated lived experience and other ways of knowing as well as all the relevant dimensions of discipline-based knowledge; and significant co-design of an integrated curriculum, including integrated assessment (knowing how assessment drives teaching and learning practices).

This neat account doesn't seek to obscure the commitment that this required over a period of years from the Faculty Board, the Department of Community Medicine (who convened and provided

the infrastructure for this innovation) and from the 15 medical specialists, scientists, and practitioners involved in co-developing and facilitating the problem-based and learning-centred program. The program was well documented and evaluated, and it was clear from staff that the experience of facilitating profound learning (rather than transmitting knowledge) had a profound impact on them personally and professionally. This experience—followed by five years of curriculum transformation work in the Faculty of Architecture and allied disciplines—deeply shaped my praxis in relation to systemic intervention. Recalling this experience helps remind me 1) what is possible with commitment and collaboratively conceived systemic interventions aimed at bringing together bodies of knowing and bodies of knowledge, and 2) what is required to work structurally and systemically at creating the conditions for change and navigating systemic transformation.

Setting the Scene: Weaving, Bridging and Holding—in Aid of 'Escape'

In the interests of weaving, we are guided by methodological pluralism. By this we mean we do not slavishly follow a particular methodology or method. It does not mean we are 'just making things up.' Both of us seek rigour and precision in sensing the need for and application of the right method for the right time, rather than the strict application of a particular method no matter the context. We refer to our innovation in praxis as the constant weaving of content, context, and practice in order to bridge worldviews and hold spaces for transition. We use the word *weaving* because our work is not about practicing or perfecting a method or process. This word also feels apt given the word *complexity* is rooted in the Latin words com (with) and plexus (braided or entwined). Our approach is deeply influenced by and builds upon the work of others. And it is strongly informed by our theoretical understanding, including of systemic intervention and the need for ongoing boundary critique in relation to values to build resistance to totalizing ideologies which require a continual reference back to a single truth (Midgley, 2008). We seek to structure for emergence as our goal and see the process as a means, not an end, to this aim (Seneque, 2017). Our intent is to show how our approach to systems thinking and practice is with the aim of bringing our influences alive.

In the interests of bridging, we pay close attention to bridging worldviews. Given our red threads, it may come as no surprise that our shared focus is on creating spaces for us humans, in our shared humanity, trapped in old ways of thinking, to escape the confines of our worldviews. We recognise that in some ways we are pursuing the impossible. Our minds are deeply embedded in and shaped by contexts and bounded rationalities that we can never escape (Simon, 1955). But if we can even free a thought or an idea from the confines of history, we believe we are making progress towards co-sensing and co-shaping the future

that is wanting to emerge (Scharmer, 2009). As Donella Meadows wrote, navigating an interconnected, feedback-dominated world requires looking for long-term behaviour and structure and being aware of false-boundaries and bounded rationality (Meadows, 2008).

In this, we both bring our lived experience. As our origin stories above illustrate, we have lived and seen the ways in which knowledge systems exclude and alienate certain ways of knowing, being, and doing. We also bring shared theoretical foundations in relation to our understanding of how to catalyse and support systemic change as we escape our own bounded rationalities and bring together diverse bodies of knowing and bodies of knowledge. We seek to create spaces where there is room for this difference—for mutualities and for as- yet-unrealised mutual connections. We see language as world making and seek to deconstruct language and make visible underlying assumptions (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018). We emphasise the importance of deep listening and challenging worldviews in the search for new patterns of meaning (Best & Holmes, 2010; Birney, 2021; Edquist & Johnson, 2005; Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Lent, 2017; McKenzie & Cabaj, 2020; Ramage & Shipp, 2020; Scharmer, 2009; Schein, 1993; Turnhout et al., 2020; Wheatley & Frieze, 2011). This is part of a broader field of work and we recognise the work of many others in decolonising systems change (Goodchild, 2021; Yunkaporta, 2023).

In order to bring together elements of what we mean by 'escape' for transformation, rather than dissecting all our theoretical influences as distinct from our practice, true to form we have chosen to weave them together in the illustration below. Choosing a case study was not an easy task. Over the years, we worked together on diverse systems change initiatives, from human and planetary flourishing through to food systems, health and wellbeing. So, while we have chosen a case (David Suzuki Foundation, Canada), we have resisted presenting a linear case study story. Instead, we have extracted key features from our work and have presented them here as six elements of 'escape' for transformation. We have categorised them as:

1. Strengthening relationships

2. Structuring for emergence

3. Integration of content and process

4. Deconstructing realities and dismantling constraints

5. Recognition and reconstructing world views

6. Enlivening possibilities

A Snapshot of the Case

During the pandemic years, we co-facilitated two 'Virtual Labs' for the David Suzuki Foundation, one in 2020 and one in 2022 as part of the formation of the Well-Being Economies Alliance For Canada And Sovereign Indigenous Nations. Our work was conducted online, in different times zones [Megan in France, Fiona in Sydney; and the participants across Canada/ Turtle Island].

- In 2020, we created a five week 'Design Lab' with the goal of initiating a powerful new hub that could be one of the green shoots in the ongoing emergence of a new economic system for Canada and Canadians.

- In 2022, we created a six week 'Imagination Lab: Northern Woods Summit' that extended this work and sought to dive even deeper into the mindsets and ways of thinking that were holding the current economic system in place.

In each Lab, approximately 60 participants were invited from across government, First Nations communities, civil society, academia, and activism. This was carefully curated with an intention to bring together vastly different world views and perspectives. In both instances, we were grappling with the reality that the world we live in has been shaped by human ideas and beliefs—and deeply held convictions and unconscious assumptions underpin the dominant way of life. We recognised that the same is true of our economy. It is one that has been built on thousands of years of cultural and financial evolution anchored in the Western world's ways of thinking. Over the past century, the model that currently drives the economy has become ever more focused on productivity and efficiency as goals instead of means. Entrenched myths and metaphors reinforce a desire for endless development and material growth. Unquestioned narratives underpin our economy and our current destructive trajectories. With absolute trust and authorisation from the David Suzuki Foundation's Yannick Beaudoin, we were given free rein (within the constraints of the online environment) to put storytelling and world building at the heart of our discussions of the economy—some of the very things that have been devalued in the past.

Strengthening Relationships

We start by paying close attention to how to create the 'right space,' 'container,' or 'holding environment' for the collective to achieve its goals. For some, the 'container' is held through a function of a backbone team or convenor roles. For us, the container is not built by individuals. Rather it is a property of the relations with participants, with careful stewardship enabled by constant signal

scanning and responsiveness to context. The 'container' is not static but rather dynamic, ephemeral, and evolving or diminishing depending on that context. This is closely aligned to the definition of social capital, where the container is an intangible socio-cultural space of relationships between individuals (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). The work then becomes how to help shape this socio-cultural space to enable relationships between individuals that will result in new possibilities.

A key element of this for us is examining and disrupting patterns of power. In order to build and strengthen relationships, we must grapple with the power dynamics that act as barriers to trust (Mooijman, 2023). Readers may be familiar with how theorists of social capital have developed a distinction between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). We seek to escape the confines of these types of social capital as defined by power, status, and history. Through purposeful engagement, we invite participants to recognise their own power beyond the 'formal' including aspects such as informal, social, knowledge, and connection powers (Norbom & Lopez, 2016). Through the process, we aim to move from a place of respectful 'linking' across a power differential, to the equalising of power dynamics, and the resulting bridging and eventually trust based bonding capital that emerges as participants realise they share much more than they anticipate. Here we are influenced by soft systems methodology and critical systems heuristics—valuing multiple perspectives and the role of power and intractable problems with no simple solutions (Cabrera et al., 2023; Checkland, 1999; Ulrich, 1983,). This 'bridging work' is critical to unlocking a different level of willingness to engage in the often uncomfortable work of 'unlearning' and shared meaning-making.

Woven into Practice

In the design of the 2022 Imagination Lab (Northern Woods Summit), we paid particular attention to the quality and nature of relationships and interconnections and processes to disrupt existing system patterns. To overcome the anticipated tendency to move to debate and point scoring by 'experts,' we opened the Summit with the invitation to engage in dialogue as a deeper level of listening and conversation and to embody principles of humility, curiosity, and creativity.

We were constantly creating readiness rather than assuming this was a given state of being.

In diverse collectives, we are grappling with a spectrum—from those that want to take a radical leap to those that wish to back away from the cliff's edge. Judgement is required to create the right nudge or pause in that moment. We kept re-issuing the invitation throughout the rituals and moments of the convening. Recognising the impatience of some participants to 'get to action,' we emphasised purposeful engagement as a critical action in its own right and reiterated: "If you don't make the time

for a different quality of engagement, you will not get a different quality of action" (Facilitators, 2022).

Two key elements we made visible upfront were power and roles. We encouraged participants to notice the default roles they might typically take up, the tendency to ascribe change required to someone else (typically someone not in the room) and the changes required of all system actors—not just one. In raising awareness of the roles we can take up by default—usually those that are most comfortable to us (for example: critic, expert, editor, activist) we explored the alternative roles that the system or collective might need in that moment. We sought to broaden understanding of what is possible and encouraged participants to look beyond the more typical roles (convenor, advocate, advisor, facilitator, intermediary) to others such as: map maker, knowledge translator, truth teller or ideas mid-wife, to name a few. The aim was to build their muscles and skill in being able to diagnose what is needed and take up diverse roles that support 'pattern shifting.'

We also introduced some simple Critical System Heuristics as reflection questions in order to raise awareness of the subjective nature of meaning-making and boundary judgements (Ulrich, 1983, Ulrich, 2000). For example, we prompted a discussion of the dominant worldviews that are seen as most legitimate or are most powerful in determining what is (versus what ought to be). We encouraged reflection on who holds the power to decide what counts (or ought to count) as relevant knowledge. We linked this to the idea that knowledge can include perceptions, implicit understandings, unconscious motivations, and behavioural habits. It also includes the practices and traditions we inherit, the values that are implied and the judgements we may not even be aware that we make (Polanyi, 1966).

Finally, we emphasised that different types of knowledge, and different ways of knowing, all have equal validity, and we challenged the westernised concept of 'the expert.'

Structuring for Emergence

Complex systems are beautifully unpredictable. We tap into this in our design with the idea of structuring for emergence. We are possibly stretching the definition here as we refer to generative emergence as both process and outcome. At its most simple, emergence is a characteristic that basically means that there are qualities of the whole that are not seen in the parts (Cabrera, 2020). These 'parts' include relationships, which are not just interconnecting threads, but things in and of themselves.

One interpretation of emergence as an outcome is that patterns of organisation emerge due to the collective behaviour and interactions of agents in the system. These patterns can only be seen by looking at the whole (e.g. schools of fish, colonies of ants, traffic flows). For us, we integrate both—emergence as characteristic and as outcome. We are deeply influenced by the fields of: second order cybernetics—especially the concept of feedback; general systems theory—with its framing of open systems, emergence, boundary and hierarchy; and, complexity theory—with a focus on self-organisation, emergence and nonlinearity.

And so we refer to generative emergence as the process of creating new structures of relationships and interconnections that can potentially generate novel properties and behaviours. Our focus here again is 'escape' and the idea that unpredictable and novel forms arise from emergence (Chandler, 2018). We want to see new 'entities' emerge with properties that seem to be autonomous from the components from which they are created, generating their own rules and logic (Chandler, 2018; Lichtenstein, 2014; Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). Just as complex adaptive systems are unpredictable, we cannot predict what these new properties might be. For us, it is both the 'discontinuity' of past patterns and the creation of as unyet imagined future possibilities that we hope for (Polanyi, 2008).

We also draw here on theories of 'knowledge systems,' where learning is a socially enabled process and knowledge is distinguished from information. From a systems perspective, knowledge is both an entity and a process that combines information with experience, diverse contexts, interpretation, and reflection (Balle et al., 2019). It is therefore socially constructed and contextually dependent (Winterton et al., 2014). For knowledge to be 'gained,' it has to be subject to interpretation and then integrated into our own embedded personal knowledge system (Breschi & Malerba, 2001; Ferreira et al., 2020; Midgley, 2000). This interpretation is influenced by perspective (MacDonald, 1998). Changing perspectives can require unlearning what we previously thought we knew—or letting go of a particular world view. Or, as Starbuck (1996) described it, "often, before they can learn something new, people have to unlearn what they think they already know" (p. 725).

Woven into Practice

In the 2022 Imagination Lab, we were conscious of needing to create loosely held 'structures' that would enable new properties or behaviours to emerge because of the interconnections that have been woven. We knew that we needed to design processes that would create the conditions for emergence. We also needed to challenge traditional siloes of expertise and organisational boundaries (Clarke et al., 2019). We did this by:

'Making space' for self-organisation and un-learning through learning circles that were question driven, rather than 'discipline' or 'topic' focused.

Including feedback loops through interspersed 'plenaries' and the inclusion of experimental approaches to deliver rapid feedback from diverse sources (seeking and analysing data from the wider system through assumptions testing and rapid prototyping).

We offered learning circles as spaces for creating new stories and paradigms. The learning circle journey was framed by a loose structure, offered as optional 'scaffolding' to support the collective work. Groups were formed based on participants responses to the question: What is the 'imagining' you want to do? A suggested (but optional) process for groups was proposed that included the steps of developing a framing question, identifying and testing critical assumptions, and then developing a north star for their future world. They were also invited to incorporate rapid prototypes (stories, poems, visuals, soundscapes, scenarios, metaphors) as process or product to embody the essence of their ideas.

Importantly, learning circles were self-organising and participants were invited to drop in and out of circles as they desired. Learning circles evolved organically and demonstrated emergence in action. At the start there were 11 circles and this eventually self-organised into five circles focused on:

- Regenerative, healing, connecting spaces
- Collective and inclusive leadership
- Well-being as a centre of economies
- Reimagining governance
- Reclaiming (restoring) the narrative

Deconstructing Realities and Dismantling Constraints

As mentioned above, creating spaces for 'unlearning' helps to enable the 'deconstructing realities and dismantling constraints.' So too does a shift in focus towards the deep structures and underlying conditions of the system—such as mindsets, institutions, and behaviour—the things that can hold a problem in place.

We see our role in supporting participants to deconstruct patterns and unpack conditions as one of accompaniment. We seek to increase their notice of these patterns, whilst also recognising that we too are part of the system. Another critical element of our work is experimenting with processes for meaning-making, exploring alternate world views and making space for different realities.

Learning circles are one way to enable this (as described above). However, for the process of 'unlearning' to occur in a collective, we also require a way to hold different views and different ways of being at the same time, and for multiple perspectives to co-exist. We must also allow for experimental action which enables new application and adaptation (Hsu & Lamb, 2020; Reese, 2020).

For this, we turn to co-inquiry and dialogue. Dialogue as a practice is about paying attention to patterns of conversation and moving from more closed to more open modes (Scharmer, 2003). It is about engaging intentionally with the goal of increasing understanding, addressing problems, and questioning thoughts and actions. Dialogue, unlike debate or even discussion, is not about reaching agreement or 'winning' the argument (Romney, 2005). Rather it is about moving beyond polarization and thinking together in relationship. Importantly, it is a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people (Isaacs, 1999). As this greater 'group intelligence' emerges, so too does a deeper level of collective understanding (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). Our orientation to this approach also draws upon an 'innovation systems' perspective, where innovation is the outcome of relationships between various actors who recombine knowledge to achieve positive novel changes (Felton et al., 2010,; Klerkx & Leeuwis, 2008; Spielman, 2005).

Woven into Practice: For both the 2020 Design Lab and 2022 Imagination Lab, we relied upon dialogue as a key scaffolding and means to create the conditions for emergence. This was particularly true for the 2020 Design Lab where, given the thousands of years of history that has led to current economic thought, we believed that each session would need to 'liberate' participants and build their capability in the thinking and doing of systems transformation. We needed to integrate content and process, and so the 2020 Design Lab emphasised co-creation through generative dialogue. We drew deeply on Theory U (Scharmer, 2007) in the design, emphasising the importance of co-initiation and co-sensing. We also drew upon systems and design thinking to scaffold what were essentially prototypes in process, ways of thinking and producing.

To help build readiness, we shared some of the desirable behaviours of dialogue, including content from Schein (1993) and Isaacs (1999) on listening without resistance. Our message to participants was that fragmentation doesn't exist in the world—it's a function of our thinking and, as Bohm (1996) wrote, dialogue is the vehicle for the art of thinking together and building coherence. We emphasised the asking of questions as a dialogue superpower. We also reminded participants that we were seeking to engage with a plurality of expressions of wellbeing economies and were asking for creativity, not consensus. Our invitation was for participants to "let go of certainty" and enjoy exploring new possibilities through co-inquiry—where a core group explores, tests, and builds understanding of all the elements of the complex issue they are considering.

Given we were delving into the realm of economics, it was acknowledged that traditional experts had a role to play. However, we intentionally only invited a handful of economic experts to each Lab. This was to give space to diverse participants from government, civil society, and community. We wanted to recognise that all human beings live in connection with one another and are deeply embedding in and shaped by the economic system. So all have a critical role to play. Indeed, our provocation was that the economy is too important to be left to economists. Helping participants to see that many viewpoints are legitimate and need to be present was a first step.

Specifically, for the 2020 Design Lab, with the goal of helping participants to 'loosen the constraints' of epistemological and ontological bindings, we intentionally provided simplistic provocations. The first dialogue question was framed around "thousand year old stories, myths & metaphors" and that "the seeds of the future are in the present." We asked "where are you seeing new narratives emerge as seeds in the current system?" The second dialogue was framed around systems purpose and "What could a radically reimagined purpose be?" Finally, we asked "What is an outcome you 'barely dare' to hope for the We All Can hub?" to welcome the 'crazy ideas' and more radical aspirations for the future. Homework for participants was to "develop the narrative that is meaningful to you." We invited songs, poems, cartoons, or 'tall tales' around the outcomes they imagined. We offered a simple 'once upon a time' template as an optional starting point—wanting to show that it is possible to 'escape' the dominant paradigm and think beyond the current system whilst reducing the intimidation factor.

Recognition and Reconstructing World Views

World building in our minds is shaped by many factors, internal and external. Finding ways to consciously appreciate and work with world building and meaning-making is critical to our work. Interestingly, while systems thinking can help make visible the interconnections across a system, we have found that participants who come to realise this complexity can end up feeling overwhelmed, immobilised, and disempowered. As a way of releasing agency, as well as a way of identifying powerful leverage points, we have found that other theoretical lenses beyond systems thinking and processes such as reflexive futuring and rapid prototyping can help to build a bridge between the 'zoomed out' enormity of complex systems and the 'zoomed in' focus required for intervention points.

Our choices on process and methods are influenced by the degree of entrapment that participants feel (or exhibit) and the anxiety and fear that can accompany this awareness. In explaining our approach, we recognise that this will resonate for many practitioners. Again, futures thinking is not new and has

evolved over decades from across a range of fields and disciplines. Our innovation is in the weaving of the threads.

In the reflexive futuring field, we are influenced by a diverse range of authors and works. Examples include the work of Sharpe and Hodgson on developing a "future consciousness" and building awareness of the future potential of the present moment in order to create the futures we aspire to (Sharpe et al., 2016; Sharpe & Hodgson, 2019). We also frequently draw on the six pillars of futures thinking (mapping, anticipating, timing, deepening, creating alternatives, and transforming) as proposed by Inayatullah (2008).

At this stage, there is also a need to create a new 'scaffolding' for insights generated. The challenge here is to avoid returning to current worldview framing and to also enable tacit knowledge to emerge. For us, the use of a powerful metaphor has proven one of the most effective ways to reconstruct insights and hold these insights as future possibilities. Sometimes we draw upon simple well-known metaphors in systems thinking such as the 'iceberg.' Other times we have used different metaphors to suite the context, such as a kitchen or forest.

Woven into Practice

In thinking about the future, it is typical of the human mind to extrapolate from historical patterns. Breaking free from this logic can require a structure that helps to bring possibilities to life in a different way. Again we use the 2020 Design Lab as an example. Here we used a simple 'futuring' activity called "Over the hedge" which is modified from Inayatullah's (2008) final pillar of Transformation. Our framing was:

"… It is five years beyond Covid and the world has changed…WE-All CAN has had a powerful impact. Remember all those economic purposes we imagined? Many of these have come to life and been realised. We are seeing locally designed and interconnected systems across the country. The strong narrative we developed and the impact that the Hub has had (in local contexts and across the country) means that Turtle Island has become a living example of wellbeing economies globally."

We asked participants to then capture their responses using images, pictures, metaphors, or words and to "paint a picture of this preferred future."

- What does it look and feel like? What can you see and hear? How does it function?
- Now coming back to the present: How did we get there? How did we build on the strengths and opportunities in the existing system(s)? What were the key obstacles we needed to overcome?
- What did the first two years look like?

In coming back to the present, then two years into the future, we weaved in the three horizons model. Our goal was to help participants navigate complexity, both through the practices of futures thinking and the identification of leverage points (Meadows, 2009) and systemic interventions (Midgley, 2000).

In the 2022 Imagination Lab, we also tapped into a "diversity of imaginations" in a range of ways. This included activities such as:

- *Imagining new narratives* – where participants undertook a visualisation exercise and were asked to "Imagine a wellbeing economy that meets your needs. Try visualising this as a landscape." They were invited to draw, sketch or create however they wished.

- We also held an interview with a time traveller from 2050 (with Yannick Beaudoin role playing himself from 2050) – where participants could ask questions of what was the world like then (this led to questions on everything from the future functions of the nation-state through to questions about the existence of regional currencies).

To enable integration of collective insights, a rapid synthesis process saw participants generate and explore their findings as the layers of an iceberg. This iceberg became a key piece of co-created content but was largely a call to cognitive reasoning. We also wanted to hold space for different ways of knowing and the emotions and inquiry that drove participants in the Lab. We decided that a short film would help to capture this essence much more effectively than written words. The film was created with participants shortly after the Lab and is a powerful capture of the questioning and yearning of participants, rather than a set of answers or solutions[1].

Enlivening Possibilities

It was Shackle (1974) who said, "When we ask whether some particular thing is possible we are asking about our own state of knowledge and thought." In this work he was reflecting on the human predicament in choice and action—incomplete information and uncertainty balanced by hope and imaginative reach. We are limited by our perception of reality as much as our actual realities. It is why this step is so critical. It is about creating the conditions for people to step

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[1] Short film available at: https://youtu.be/_JeqbYYzEEc?si=vIdOBXJzdYs4nS8l

into their own possibilities and their own self-organisation. It is about pairing futuring with agency.

We seek to 'enliven possibilities' in practice by creating and sustaining the spaces for learning and experimentation that can take the seedlings of possibilities and let them grow into something new. It is in this moment that inductive reasoning and exploration is so important. It liberates participants to generate their own new pathways, connections, conditions, and innovations. This is also the part where the participant truly becomes an 'escape artist.' Yes, they can see beyond the trappings of the current system. Now the challenge becomes not only seeing it, but having hope that they can and will escape it. In an era where we are taught to be so distrustful of inductive thinking, emergence, questioning beliefs, or creating our own imaginary worlds, we have sought to unleash these respective strengths on participants so that the collective can help itself break free. Fostering imagination, building, and relationality and inquiring into the metaphysical is not incidental. It is central to the work of building agency and action of a different kind.

Woven into Practice

In the 2020 Lab, for the final plenaries in this series, with all 60+ participants, and guest David Suzuki, we focused on the action-enhancing architecture that would support the emergence of a new economic purpose. Smaller groups enabled the space for dialogue, dreaming, and diversity of perspectives.

Having synthesised the key outcomes and themes emerging in the first deep dive, we played these back to participants an asked "What do we mean—and what 'work' might be needed—to see radical paradigm shifts become reality?" Participants could choose any of the following breakout groups, each topic having come from earlier dialogues:

1. Rediscovering the commons
2. Getting beyond our bubble
3. Diversity, pluralism and different ways of knowing:
4. Imagining a different reality
5. Engaging with power
6. Redefining wealth and wellbeing

In reporting back, we didn't ask for a recap of conversations. Instead, we asked, "What new meaning did you discover? And what does this tell us about what's needed and what's possible?" We then moved to integration and "action of a different kind." Drawing inspiration of Stewart Brand's Clock of the Long Now (2000), we asked "what is the "fast and slow" work of the emerging Hub?"

In this session, we took up a 'mapmaker' role ourselves, playing back a roadmap that synthesised the visions, principles, processes, and questions that participants themselves had raised. We challenged participants to consider: What is the basis or grounds for deep action of another kind? We shared Christopher Alexander's (2002) souffle metaphor: "When we cook a soufflé, we generate the soufflé by initiating transformations between eggs, butter, sugar, and so on: we do not try to build it" (p. 180). And we asked:

- What are the key ingredients that need to be brought to the table?
- What are the interactions amongst these ingredients that need to be transformed?
- Who needs to be brought into the kitchen to bring these ingredients together?
- How will we bring them in?

In the final session, we again played a mapmaker role, drawing out of all the conversations to date the participants most deeply held questions across all cohorts. These shaped the work of this final dialogue and participants could choose to join any breakout group:

- Building new narratives - How do we retire old narratives? How do we bring in the new storytellers?
- Holding the circle - How do we gather? How does the hub become a safe place to sit in circle and allow for trust and belonging and exploring? What would our ceremony be?
- Co-creating more widely - How do we start to create the collective visioning and narrative work with a diversity of others in an inclusive way?
- Building on what already exists - How do we learn from what has been done, what moves people, and what has been missing to date?

Reflections on Innovation and Impact

As we stated in the introduction, we do not see ourselves as neutral facilitators but rather as active and constant scanners of signals for readiness and transformation. We believe that we too, not just participants, are transformed by the process. For us, recognising and taking up this role includes weaving methodological threads to respond to context. This is perhaps our greatest claim to innovation. When we take up this role, we are committed to presencing, observation, and coherence. It is our intention to 'hold the whole' in the service of purpose. Methodologies are our tools and it is the participants, not prescriptive processes, that direct movement. That is not to say anything goes, but rather that careful judgement and constant sensing into the moment is needed. It is also not to dismiss adherence to a single methodology when appropriate. We by no

means ascribe to a single 'correct' approach nor one-size-fits all—not even when it comes to methodological pluralism. We would encourage careful sensing and judgement for any choice.

This is why we are constantly drawing upon the live questions that are emerging in the moment as our frame for the work. We hold lightly any structure that is imposed before we start. And we weave the container without labouring the threads. We might draw from futures thinking, poetry, and film. We might focus on testing boundaries and critical assumptions, or we might work on narrative development and world building as a creative collective endeavour. Our key message here is that the innovation is contextualised, momentary, and repeating in iterative loops. One framework is never enough. And multiple realities will always be present. It is our role to give space to their expression.

Do we always succeed at this? Our learning is that we can always get better—we too are unlearning and innovating always. In the case of the David Suzuki Foundation work, participants reported that they felt liberated to both call for a transformation in our dominant economic 'operating system' and in the task of imagining and creating the new paradigm—not just deconstructing the old. As part of closing sessions of the Lab, we sought feedback from participants. Some of the comments included:

> "We are being in collective practice together, starting with a shared vision, but letting go and remaking that vision as we go, always moving" (Participant, 2022, Imagination Lab)

> "It is a beautiful process to awaken, to bring people into this expansiveness and understanding. And I was thinking 'this is really interesting—I'm in a group that is now dancing.' I'm coming with this broad complexity mindset and we were able to find the nodes and the threads within that—and could still connect—coming from these two places dancing together." (Participant, 2022, Imagination Lab)

The initial discomfort of sitting with questions rather than jumping to solutions gave way to a greater appreciation that participants can generate their own radical and powerful questions. And to realise that a process of co-inquiry is an equally (or more so) valid prototype than simply generating a product or an action plan.

In reflecting on the impact of both the 2020 Design Lab and the 2022 Summit, perhaps the biggest impact we heard from participants was the 'calling in' of different possibilities. The resulting focus—on the importance of ceremony, symbolism, healing and metaphor in the economy—was uniquely enabled through the *container* that had been created.

In some ways, we could summarise as work as 'creating hope for the systems aware.' However, on reflection, we realise that what we are really seeking to do is to create escape artists; to liberate ourselves and others from the world-views

that tie (and retie) us to the current system. And so our biggest hope is that we have unleashed a new cohort of self-empowered 'escapees.'

Lessons Learnt and Lingering Questions

If we had to summarise, then three key learnings for the building of liberating structures for our 'escape artists' were:

1. The importance of taking the time to "see the system," underpinned by generative dialogue processes. While systems mapping is helpful, it needs to call to a diversity of imaginations and may include embodiment, art, and poetry.

2. Participants need ongoing support in "navigating complexity" as they move through co-sensing and world building. It can be confronting and disempowering to see the threads in the system but not to know how to have influence. The effort that goes into shared sensemaking should be matched by the time and support for invoking agency and the identification of systemic leverage points and interventions from the place where participants stand in the system.

3. It is important to encourage participants from often more comfortable spaces of co-inquiry into the uncomfortable uncertainty of 'feedback loops' and testing of assumptions, rapid prototyping, and the generation of new questions.

Through unpacking our work with the David Suzuki Foundation, we have offered six elements above as critical to the building of 'escape artists.' On reflection, we would like to add one more to this list: *Holding the Space for Transition*. This is an ongoing area of innovation in praxis for us. If transition is an emergent property of the system, then our role is to create the conditions and space for this to emerge. We cannot dictate this through a focus on outputs as impact, nor can we control the outcomes of the processes we create. Rather we see the beauty of "letting go to let come" (Scharmer, 2007), and have seen this play out in many diverse contexts. Our focus must be on participants experiencing 'escape' for themselves in a way that releases them from limited world views and opens up new futures and possibilities that may have felt impossible before. We have found that, for a range of reasons, many of us have been deeply conditioned to not challenge world views or paradigms. We are so caught in what already exists and have lost faith in ourselves as organic and dynamic entities for which the rules of emergence also hold true. Faced with rigorous questioning of future pathways, fear and anxiety can quickly turn to resistance and hostility. It is in moments of transition, with all the ambiguity and messiness, that it is hardest to hold a sense of the whole. This becomes our work of holding participants in that space between falling and landing where

nothing is yet certain. We don't have all the answers and are still very much grappling with questions of how we hold this transition space including:

- How do we move into sustained transition and rounds of collective co-inquiry and action once we leave 'the container' and encounter resistance from the wider system?

- How do we not get immediately recaptured by the dominant world view?

- How do we stay playing at the edges, dancing with difference, whilst also substantially intervening in the current context?

Key areas of our ongoing work include:

- Creating more robust and participatory frameworks and processes for 'leverage point' assessment and intervention;

- Building authorising environments and practices to extend co-creation beyond the initial container, in a way that doesn't pull us back into old patterns and holds us in transition.

In conclusion, we would argue that grappling with different realities, building new worlds, and delving into the metaphysical is not a trivial exercise. To some degree, it appears Western culture has destroyed the fabric for the collective development of new narratives and lost the art and respect for world-making outside the realm of fiction. If we go back to the 'red threads' in our lives, we have constantly been seeking to escape traditional constructs and our bounded rationality by bringing together bodies of knowing and knowledge. The injustice of exclusion and of othering or ignoring tacit knowledge and other ways of knowing is paired with an urgency to build new possibilities for a world in crisis. Helping people to not just see the current system but to enliven new possibilities for a different future and then hold the space for transition is critical, and where we see our ongoing role in forging meaningful transformation.

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