

Reflection on Summer Seminar 2013, Ed Dalsland

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I am very grateful to Miriam and Åse for inviting me to join a group of folk at this year's Summer Seminar. There were eighteen of us altogether and we worked through a Futures Experience to reflect on what organisations and leadership could look like in an environment are calling the 'New Normal'? For those of us involved in the Regional Centre of Expertise West Sweden (RCEWS) this in fact is our core research question. The answer to this is not definitive, nor precise.

We understand and accept that it must be open ended, messy and even confusing. That however is not a bad thing. To come up with answers too soon would in fact lead us back into the old patterns that have created the social, environmental and economic conditions that have lead us to champion regional renewal through the RCE structure.

Collective Exploration

The RCE we have emerging from the puzzled and curious nature of this condition. It is calling us to explore collectively, co-creatively, the possibilities of doing things differently. This is why we thought to have a futures experience would be a productive use of our time over the two days of July 1 and 2. For us futures thinking is a powerful tool for opening up our working contexts to new ideas and new actions to express these ideas. It is all about finding new ways to learn – in fact it can be called anticipatory action learning.

We anticipate things, set up actions to meet the possibilities and risks that we have foreseen and then we reflect on this before returning to the start of the process. And what makes this form of learning special is that we really care about the outcome and we really want to make west Sweden a great place to be and we also are aware that each one of these actions is a social experiment and that we are part of wider nets of learning and experimenting and that ultimately what we are doing here is relevant and important for the entire planet. We are all connected in the global rhizome and what connects us all is the ethic of care.

Drama as a Ground

Åse took charge of our bodies and ran wonderful drama exercises between our futures sessions. We enjoyed the presence of Stanislavsky as she channeled him to the group. She stretched us by taking us into domains where we role played and tested our improvisatory limits. It was great to come back to the body in this way again and again over the two days.



Food has also been an important part of our Summer Seminars and this one was no exception. The kitchen is a zone of futures possibilities and relationship building as is the collective dinner table. We had some delicious food over the two days and the fairies were in abundance as plates were magically transported to the dish washer, the pots cleaned, the tables set and the meals served.



Four Ideas

I introduced four ideas to the group before we began to contextualize the futures work I do. **The first idea was 'existential dissonance'**. Much futures work is inhibited by our habits, fears and conditioning. The stress, anxiety and confusion we often face can be the result of this existential dissonance: the gap in our lives between what we wish for (aspire to) and what we do. The wider the gap the more we suffer and the less empowered we feel. One goal of futures work is to reduce this gap.

The second idea is that of 'meme'. Memes are the cultural equivalent of genes. Just as genes contain the collective memory of our physical past so as to create our physical form, so memes contain the collective memory of our cultural past so as to create our identity. One goal of futures work is to create the spaces for us to collectively create new memes to carry our culture (and identity) forward beyond the business as usual world we believe we inhabit.

The third idea was anticipatory learning. This is an important concept because as social beings we are always learning and much of this learning comes from the past and our present situation. Little has been related before now to the future. Anticipation covers both our preferences and our fears. It is a powerful concept with clear effects in the world of action. On the one hand the word evokes a sense of promise, and this is important to any futures practice, as to see the future as only a place of dark foreboding diminishes our ability to respond proactively and with the necessary mixture of courage and imagination. Yet we also need to have the real fear of collapse and decline to goad us into both personal and collective action.

Thus anticipatory futures and the foresight work it engenders offers us both the *carrot and the stick*. Both are woven into the fabric of the possible and both invite us to consider how best to engage with the question of sustainable futures as a praxis grounded in local realities yet striving for a beyond that will remain forever unattainable; offering a universalisable possibility of sustainability that is always just out of reach, yet always calling us forth to action.

The final concept I presented to the group was 'relational consciousness'. This refers to the need for ever widening awareness that we are all connected – connection is in fact what makes us human and to expand this awareness lies at the heart of what humans have been doing for millennia. Futures work is always based on self interest: we want to optimize our chances for success in any context. If our self interest is narrowly defined we are destined for problems. If however our self interest is linked to the entire Cosmos we inhabit we think and act in very different ways. In fact we think across domains of self interest from the micro one of “What’s in it for me?” to the local one of “What can I do to make our community a better place?” to “What can I and my community do to make our country a better place?” and so on until we ask ourselves “How can I and my community and country make the world a better place?”

The Summer Seminar Workshops

These four concepts set the scene for our workshop and our reflection on the possibilities for our emerging RCEWS. The following is a brief outline of the workshops

Three Objects.

In this workshop participants found three objects from their environment and spoke about them to a partner. The first object represented some element of their past, the second an element of their present and the third an element of their future. The purpose of this exercise was to locate the future in our own lives and to get us thinking by association as opposed to in a linear or 'rational' way.

The Futures Wall

In this workshop we broke into groups and answered these three questions:

1. Name five key drivers shaping your world today?
2. Name five Big Ideas that are changing your world today?
3. Name five things we will need to different in the future?

Each question was answered on five separate sheets of paper and placed on the Futures wall. Each question was asked once the previous question had been answered (so there was no overlap). Once all answers for all questions were completed we all went and looked at the Futures Wall.





The groups were then given one final task:

Take one element from each set of questions and create a futures algebra from it and offer a final synthesis. The answers looked something like this:



Futures Mandalas

This workshop focused on the implications of ideas on one another. The topic was power: Hard Leadership and Soft Leadership. It involved dividing the group into two parts and setting out a set of things we would expect a hard or a soft leader to do. This was done on the floor with pieces of paper making a circle.



The groups then switched over and looked at this first set of impact cards and create a second circle of things that the first circle would generate. Now the mandala is clearly growing. Then the groups switch again.



This time they look at the second circle and create a third circle of things that the second circle would generate. It is important to not pay too much attention to the inner circles so that the implications are not seen as linear but more relational in nature.



The fourth and final workshop involved an exploration of what a traditional and 'soft' or New Normal organisation looks like. Again we divided into two groups and this time applied the Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) process to the question. We began by looking at litany, the surface daily stuff that happens and that organisations deal with – this involved considerable discussion and thinking for those in the soft group but was quite easy for those in the traditional group. We then looked at the way both organisations would set up systems to manage the business of the world and the expectations of staff and clients etc.

This was as far as we got because confusion and discomfort arose in the soft New Normal group and we became very much aware that although we know what we do not want it is harder to describe what we do want of an organisation. It became clear that the idea of our organisation – a polycentric and rhizomic organisation – was exciting but hard to imagine in any clear way. The official version of the traditional organisation on the other hand was very straight forward.

Conclusion

One thing we identified in this is that we need time to do this work and that the new normal was an invitation to take time. Some in the group wanted us to act now, quickly to 'fix' things but others argued that we need slow time to do the deep work to accompany any substantial shift in our culture. We need to challenge ourselves to slow down, to accept that it is okay not to know the answers, so that we can do better things and not simply rush in and do things better and as a result repeat the patterns of the past. This paradox is what we currently face. The RCEWS is a rich opportunity to do better things. We will nurture this space and run more seminars and create more spaces to explore. We will try to avoid giving answers and generating solutions instead focusing on creating opportunities and possibilities. This is key to the social learning at the heart of our RCEWS.