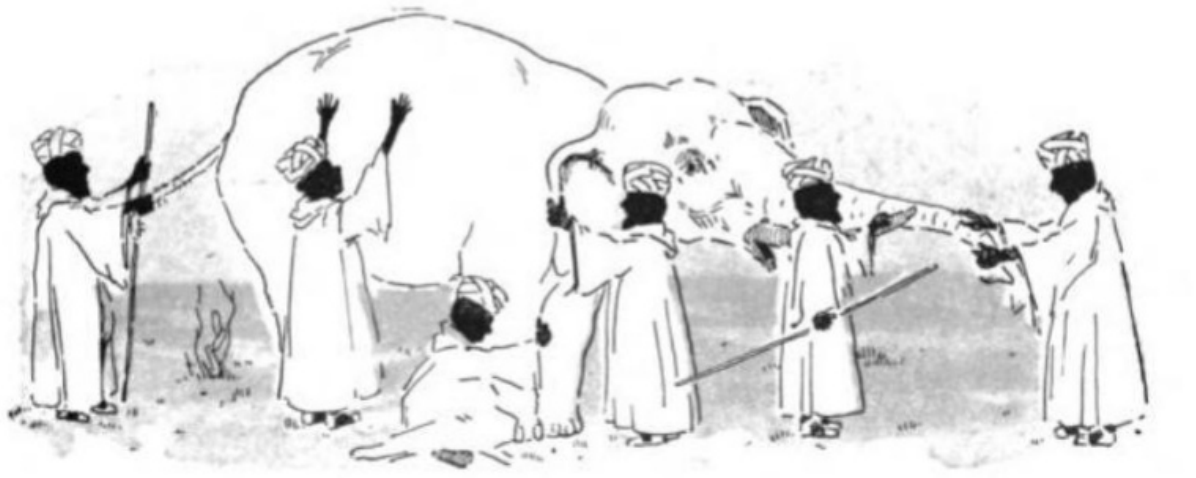
CoCreativeConsulting™

The Elephant of Complex Systems Change

March 18,2017 | Russ Gaskin



People often ask how I came to do the work that I do today. I usually say, “I had no plan. I just wanted to learn about a lot of things, I love people, and I wanted make a difference, and somehow I ended up doing what I do!”

Not the most helpful answer, I admit, but true at least.

Next comes some variation of this question: “If I want to do what you do, what should I learn?”

If that might be a question in your own mind, read on…

Okay. This is a tougher question for me to answer, in part because I’m not you and in part because it’s like trying to describe a whole elephant all at once. In our work, all the seemingly disparate disciplines work together and each performs a useful function, so it’s hard for me to take them apart. To answer the question of what one should learn to do this work, should I focus on design thinking, systems thinking, Agile, Lean, or maybe (the thing I use the most but that most people have never heard of) Gestalt Facilitation? I can’t talk about all of them at once but none of them alone will answer the question.

This article is an attempt to at least outline the whole elephant—all the fields and concepts that we tend to use at CoCreative. I’m laying out the 26 fields and nearly 200 concepts that we draw on—sometimes daily, sometimes occasionally—in our work. It’s a picture that to us seems coherent, unified, and whole, but to others may seem like a disparate collection of theories, models, and methods.

I hope the latter is not the case—and that people do see how these things work together, but I did wonder if I was taking a worthwhile chance with this article. For people wanting to do this work (and we WANT more people to do this work!), I do not want this article to be overwhelming. I especially do not want anyone to conclude that, “I can’t study or learn all that stuff, so I won’t be successful in this work” … because that’s just not true.

One benefit of CoCreative's experience in drawing from across these fields is that we have taken some of the best concepts and tools from them (those we use most often) and pulled them together into an approach and training program that conveys the key elements of each more simply and practically than they tend to appear in their native contexts. For example, the typical methods used in systems thinking are complex and, we think, largely impractical with diverse groups, so we've developed and captured ways of mapping systems that are practical and that nearly anyone can do (and you can find these on the Our Tools page on our website). We also provide tools and insights from these fields in our coaching and consulting work so you learn them at a time and stage of work when they are relevant and their value is immediately apparent. In other words, you don't need to learn all the bits and pieces of the fields below—and you likely won't, but you will be successful anyway.

One more note before I share the whole elephant:

At the last minute and on Maren's advice, I divided the 26 fields into 4 sections, with those we use most often in section and those we use least (but still love) in section 4. We hope that if you decide to study any field directly, and consult the primary sources for yourself, this simple weighting will give you some sense of what might be most valuable for leading your own Collaborative Innovation initiative.

That final addition also yielded a powerful and useful insight: The most useful fields in our work are the ones that deal with how we think and how we perceive what's going on in the system and within ourselves, rather than on specific steps, behaviors, or tools. That makes sense because what we see (or don't see), what we believe (or don't believe), and how we make sense of the world together have a much more profound impact on the effectiveness of our work than any specific action we might take or not take.

The Whole Elephant

Group 1: The Stuff We Use the Most

These are the fields and concepts that most inform our work and that we tend to use almost all the time in some way or another.

Field	Elements	Best Resources
Gestalt Facilitation *An approach to working with individuals and groups that based on Gestalt Therapy, centered on how people experience reality*	Intent, figure-ground, group energy and the cycle of experience, emergence, Pragnanz, similarity continuity, proximity, closure, paradoxical theory of change, levels of system, bringing the difference that the group lacks, congruence, presence, modeling, experimentation, managing energy, satisfying units of work	Emergence: The Gestalt Approach to Change

Organization Development *A body of theory and practice focused on increasing organizational effectiveness and health*	Group structure and dynamics theory and practice, change management, change metaphors, dialogic OD, group/organization/intergroup culture, action research, developmental view, use of self, boundaries	Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change by Gervase Bushe & Robert Marshak
Design Thinking *An approach to solving problems that leverages the creative strategies that designers uses to design products and services*	Human-centered perspective, ethnography, empathy and grounding strategy in the human experience, prototyping to learn, how might we?	Human-Centered Design Toolkit: An Open-Source Toolkit To Inspire New Solutions in the Developing World by IDEO
Systems Thinking *A way of understanding a whole system and the dynamics within that system to create more resilient and powerful solutions*	Seeing the whole system and its dynamics, and the human experience within that system, levels of system, intervention points	Thinking in Systems: A Primer, by Donella Meadows
Polarity Thinking *A framework for seeing and leveraging the values tensions that underlie most group dynamics*	Seeing and leveraging underlying values tensions, minimizing reactive corrections	Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences: Polarity Thinking in Our Schools, by Jane A. G. Kise

Group 2: We Use this Stuff Fairly Often

These fields give us practical concepts and tools that make the work move faster and more effectively so we tend to use them fairly often, especially in virtual and in-person work sessions.

Field	Elements	Best Resources
Lean Startup *An approach to rapidly testing, validating, and adapting an idea to turn it into reality*	Rapid prototyping, minimum viable products, eliminating uncertainty, demonstrating and validating progress, fail fast/fail early	The Lean Product Playbook: How to Innovate with Minimum Viable Products and Rapid Customer Feedback, by Dan Olsen

Agile *A "time boxed" and iterative approach to solving problems incrementally rather than through a single process of analysis, development, and delivery*	Working versions, collaboration versus negotiation, adapting to change in real-time, rapid iteration, testing and focus on continual creation of value	Agile Business: A Leader's Guide to Harnessing Complexity, by Bob Gower and Rally Software
Facilitation *The study and practice of how to most efficiently and effectively get a group from point A to point B by leveraging knowledge of group dynamics*	Divergence, convergence, ambiguity, uncertainty, shared frameworks, open discussion, closure, the "Groan Zone"	Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, by Sam Kaner and Michael Doyle

Group 3: We Use this Stuff Sometimes

We borrow—and often adapt—concepts from these fields to make our work more effective. While we may use them more implicitly in our work (e.g., we're not usually talking with network participants ABOUT storytelling and narrative), they each provide helpful lenses and concepts that make the work better. Sometimes, as with the field of Strategy, we get at the same outcomes using approaches from the fields above, so while the fields below seem important (and are in other contexts), they're not as critical for us.

Field	Elements	Best Resources
Theory U *A model for improving the quality of awareness, attention, and consciousness among the people in a system to produce better outcomes*	Supporting presence from absence, seeing the system and me within that system, holding the space of listening, observing, sensing, presencing, crystalizing, prototyping, performing	Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges, by C. Otto Scharmer
Project Management *The study and practice of getting projects done in ways that both achieve specific goals and meet specific success criteria*	Constraints model, project structure, clear goals, transparency about project status, risk recognition, managing disturbances	Project Management for the Unofficial Project Manager, by Kory Kogon, Suzette Blakemore, James Wood
Storytelling/Narrative The study and practice of how to develop stories and narratives that inspire, align, and motivate people to do wonderful things	Generative stories, hero's journey, framing, empathic narrative, strategy as story, storyboarding	Circle of the 9 Muses: A Storytelling Field Guide for Innovators and Meaning Makers, by David Hutchens

Strategy *The study of how to define a unique and valuable proposition, and how resources, skills, and competencies should be combined to deliver on that proposition*	Strategic paths, scenarios, strategy is as much about what you don't do and what you do, environmental scanning	Strategy Safari: Complete Guide Through the Wilds of Strategic Management by Henry Mintzberg and Bruce Ahlstrand Value Proposition Design: How to Create Products and Services Customers Want (Strategyzer), by Alexander Osterwalder, Yves Pigneur, Gregory Bernarda, Alan Smith, Trish Papadakos
Complexity *An approach to understanding and dealing with natural and artificial systems as they are, and not by simplifying them or breaking them down*	Emergence, path dependence, adaptation, self-organization, tipping points, powerful attractors, snap-back, networks, network nodes, network edges, feedback loops, whole system, synergy	Complexity: The Emerging Science at The Edge of Order and Chaos, by M. Mitchell Waldrop
Scientific Method *A method of knowledge creation involving systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses*	Hypotheses, testing, learning intent, provisional knowledge, intersubjectivity	Take a good science class!
Innovation *The study of how to develop new and valuable things that didn't exist before, and how to get those developments adopted by others*	Adoption curve, population subgroups, spiraling, and adoption of innovation	Implementing Diversity, by Marilyn Loden (yes, you read that right)
Consulting Practice *The study and practice of developing and satisfying clients for a consulting practice*	Assumptions, goals, client commitment, consultant roles, types of clients, contracting, resistance, feedback, action planning, implementation	Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used, by Peter Block

Group 4: We Don't Use this Stuff that Often, but We Love It!

Let me be clear: You would build a whole approach to collaboration (and some people have) based on just one of the fields below. Although we didn't do that, we have studied these fields and they've informed our thinking and we occasionally experiment with use concepts and methods from these fields.

CoCreativeConsulting™

Field	Elements	Best Resources
Appreciative Inquiry *An approach to organizational and social change that focuses on identifying what is working well, understanding why it is working well, and then doing more of it*	Principles: constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, positive; positive core; wholeness, enactment, free choice, narrative	Appreciative Inquiry for Collaborative Solutions: 21 Strength-Based Workshops, by Robyn Stratton-Berkessel
Open Space Technology *A method for convening groups around a specific question or task or importance and giving them responsibility for creating both their own agenda and experience*	Voting with feet, following energy, what emerges is what will happen--or not	Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, by Harrison H. Owen
Organizational Learning *The process of creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge within an organization or network to improve performance and outcomes*	Growth and learning mindset, learning structures, rewarding learning, learning by doing, enabling reflection	The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization, by Peter M. Senge
Improvisation *An approach to creating performances in which the plot, characters and dialogue of a game, scene or story are made up in the moment*	Yes and, everything is an offer, "When in doubt, have fun!"	Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual Paperback, by Matt Walsh, Ian Roberts, Matt Besser
Organization Studies *A body of research about how and why people construct organizational structures, processes, and practices and how these, in turn, shape social relations and create institutions that ultimately influence people*	Mechanistic organizations, open systems, contingency theory, dialectics of management	Images of Organization, by Gareth Morgan
Sales *The study and practice of how to influence people to buy or do something*	Closing, critical advance, call objectives, clear intent, providing continuous value	The Perfect Close: The Secret to Closing Sales, by James M Muir

Psychology *The scientific study of the human mind and its functions, especially those affecting behavior in a given context*	Cognitive biases, cognitive dissonance, projection, transference, family systems, shadow, personality types, thinking styles, learning styles, conflict	Thinking, Fast and Slow Paperback, by Daniel Kahneman
Sociology *the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society, from pairs to groups to entire populations*	Alienation, deviance, culture, symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, phenomenology, Ethnomethodology	Sociology, by John J. Macionis
Action Learning *A process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organization to increase their collective effectiveness*	Air time, timing, structure, focus, learning	Optimizing the Power of Action Learning: Solving Problems and Building Leaders in Real Time, by Michael J Marquardt
Values/Spiral Dynamics/Adult Development *A collection of theories and models concerned with why we cooperate, collaborate and come to conflict over differences in values and the deeper value systems that form them*	Levels of values, memes, integration across levels	Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change, by Don Edward Beck and Christopher Cowan