Syntony
Quest

Executive Report

of the Dissertation:

Creating the Conditions for the Design of Evolutionary Learning Community:
A co-creative and participatory exploration of educational images for
a sustainable and evolutionary future

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Introduction

"You see things as they are and ask Why?
But I dream things that never were and ask: Why not?"

— George Bernard Shaw

This summary report describes my dissertation research on Evolutionary Learning Community (ELC) — an ideal alternative learning system that seeks to catalyze the purposeful creation of sustainable and evolutionary futures. My research involved exploring a potential future direction of learning and human development processes in the context of contemporary global challenges. The main assumption from which my study departs is that, given the increase in human conflicts and ecological degradation, the world cannot continue functioning in the same way as it does today. Doing so would put into jeopardy the possibility of a human future in partnership with Earth. Most educational reform efforts are like rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic, unless the cultural myths that perpetuate the status quo are challenged and replaced with ones aligned with an evolutionary ethic. We need to create a new form of education. This dissertation represents a small step in this direction.

This summary report is organized into three main sections: 1) a description of the aims of my research; 2) a description of the process of inquiry; and 3) a description of the outcomes of my inquiry.

Aims

The particular purpose of the dissertation was to create the conditions, or prepare the ground, for the design of real-world ELCs. I explored four initial conditions which form a knowledge base that seeks to enable, support, and guide the design of ELC. These four conditions are:

1.   A clear and useful articulation of what ELC is:

Without a clear understanding of ELC and useful guidelines to operationalize it, the design of ELC would not be possible. This condition, therefore, is about articulating a clear vision of the possibilities for new forms of learning and designing communities and of how to create them.

2. An ideal profile of the ELC designers:

There are individuals and groups who are more ready than others to engage in the design of ELC. But what are the characteristics of potential ELC designers? This condition explores the dispositions and attributes of people interested in promoting ELC.

3. A learning framework for developing the competencies necessary for designing ELC:

The potential ELC designers need to empower themselves to actually design ELCs. This third condition, therefore, creates some flexible supporting structures — a framework — called Evolutionary Systems Design (ESD), comprised of processes and contents for the unique learning and design that each community would have to take on.

4. An image of a concrete ELC:

This condition seeks to show an application, through an imaginary example, of the other three conditions. A fictional story illustrates how the knowledge and tools developed in the other conditions can be used in the design of ELC.

Although the research focus is on a particular form of learning system, this inquiry goes beyond conventional educational research. In fact, the creation of the conditions for the design of ELC involves thinking "out of the box" and pulling together transdisciplinary knowledge in order to envision new possibilities.

Research process

"The focus of designers is not the existing system. They leap out from it and push the boundaries of the inquiry as far out as possible. They attempt to paint the largest possible picture within the largest possible context.... Designers have an expansionist orientation"

—Bela H. Banathy

The creation of the four conditions that were the subjects of research of this dissertation is part of the ongoing learning and design journey toward bringing into being concrete ELCs. As a result, the research process, conceived as learning for action, consisted of a specific version of Evolutionary Systems Design featuring social systems design; evolutionary systems perspectives; and learning conversations.
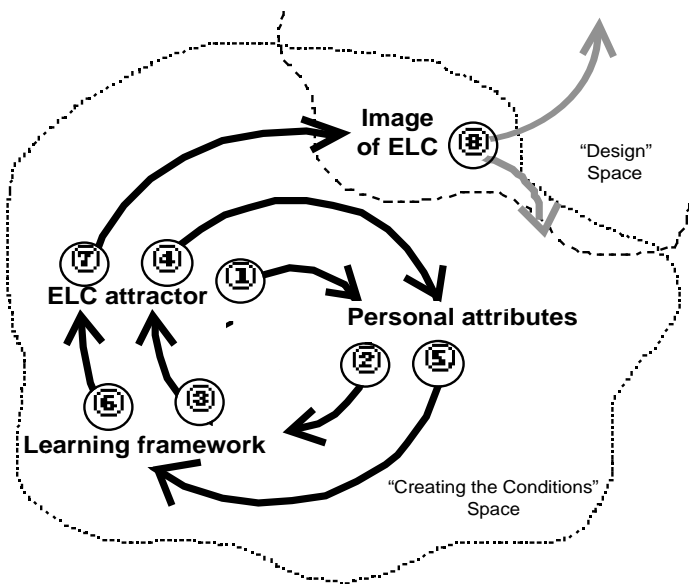
The research process consisted of two iterations (see figure 1). The first one was theoretical; it involved study and reflection for gathering relevant knowledge to support the development of ELC. The second one was characterized by conversations with a group of co-learners. The two iterations involved exploring what ELC is, who the designers of ELC are, and what they need to learn to design ELC. The knowledge and experiences gathered through the two iterations were integrated in a description of the four conditions for the design of ELC.

Figure 1. Map of the iterative inquiring process

An adaptation of Banathy's[1] design architecture served as the organizing framework. The knowledge generated through study, conversation, reflection, and integration corresponded to each of the design spaces of this architecture (see figure 2). The first space of the design
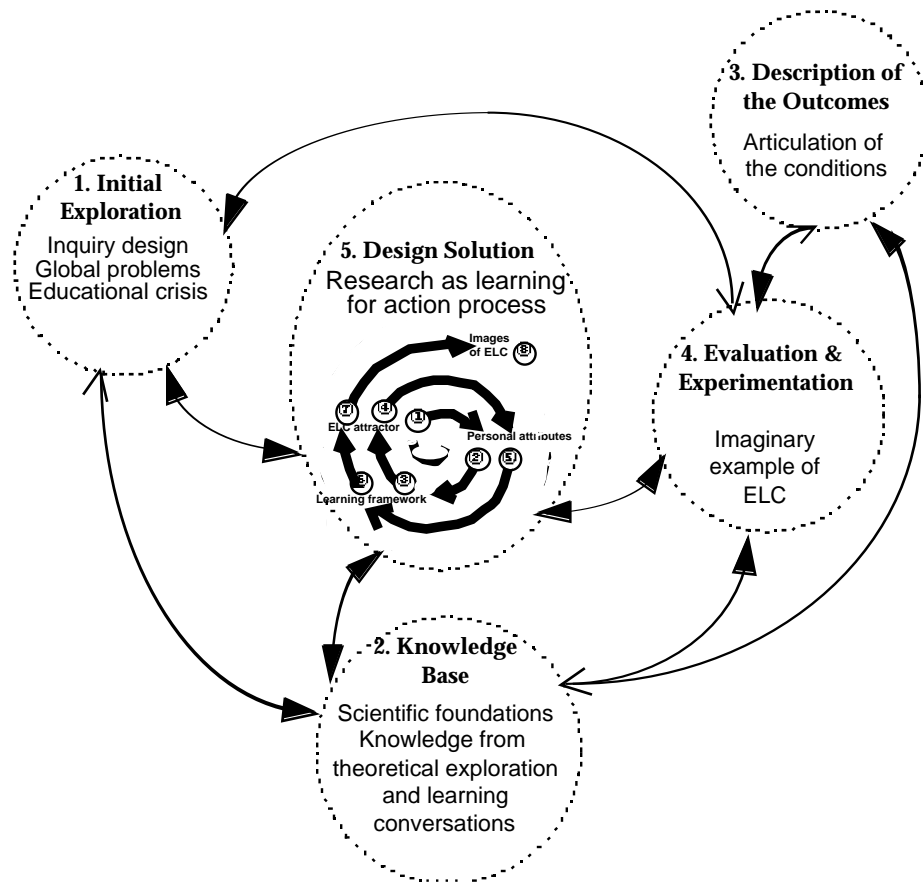

Figure 2. Organizing framework of the dissertation

architecture is the initial exploration space. There, I designed my inquiry, explored the global problematique and its relation to the crisis in education, and introduced initial ideas on ELC as a possible way to learn our way out. The second space involved the development of the knowledge base that supported the inquiry. This knowledge base included an articulation of the scientific foundations of ELC, an exposition of the transformative power of images of the future, and an exploration of the first three conditions for the design of ELC. The three conditions were explored in an expansive way, using different perspectives and weaving togethervarious sources, primary and secondary, to present a rich description of each of the conditions. The third design

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[1] Banathy, Bela H. (1996). *Designing Social Systems in a Changing World.* New York: Plenum.

space corresponds to the description of the outcomes of design. This involved the creative integration of the knowledge and insights from the literature review and the learning conversations into more precise articulations of the first three conditions. This integration served as the platform for the evaluation and experimentation space. In this space I developed a fictional story — an example of an imaginary ELC that describes how the knowledge and resources contained in the three previously presented conditions can be used in the design of concrete ELCs. The last space is that of design solution which in this case is represented by the two iterations of the process of research as learning for action that generated all the knowledge displayed in the other three design spaces.

Findings

"We suffer from a lack of visions. I think one of the best things we can do, is to articulate the visions. You are doing this beautifully in your dissertation."

— A co-learner

Interrelated global problems, such as world peace and environmental sustainability, challenge us to think in new ways. But educational processes have been perpetuating cultural myths and perspectives (e.g., the Grand Narrative of Progress) that maintain or accentuate the global crises, rather than create solutions. Although a focus on ethnic, gender, and class inequities in education has emerged in recent years, the ecological crisis is still vastly unaddressed, as are the interconnections among the problems.

Learning to think anew requires learning to learn anew. It is not about educational reform but about designing new forms of social systems where people can engage in lifelong learning and meaningfully contribute to the creation of sustainable and evolutionary futures. This is the goal of Evolutionary Learning Community: a community-based learning system dedicated to facilitate evolutionary learning for enabling conscious evolution.

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The design of ELC, and the creation of the conditions for such a design task, is not "educational research" in the conventional sense, but rather, a transdisciplinary exploration that relies on the emergent scientific knowledge drawn from systems thinking, the sciences of complexity, and human science. This scientific foundation implies that ELC embraces wholeness and interconnections, evolutionary perspectives, and participatory transformation.

The creative integration of knowledge and insights from the theoretical research and the learning conversations was articulated in the presentation of the following four conditions:

Idealized operational definition of ELC

The first condition for the design of ELC is to clarify the meaning of ELC. I use the notions of archetype and attractor as conceptual tools to communicate what ELC is. An archetype is an ideal pattern after which other things are patterned. ELC, as an archetype, is general and can be manifested in myriad concrete forms. The notion of attractor, as used in the study of nonlinear dynamics, is the pattern of the evolutionary trajectory of a system the output of which never repeats but where no point falls outside a limiting shape, showing endlessly unique behavior and yet being attracted to a clear form. ELC, as an attractor, offers some guidelines, (i.e., the "rules" of the attractor) that facilitate the design of unique ELCs while complying with the standards and values that ELC entails.

In conceptual terms, *Evolutionary Learning Community* is:

- A flexible and evolving guiding image that seeks to catalyze the design of ultimately unique and ultimately interconnected self-organizing and evolving learning systems.
- An ideal vision of a community-based learning system that seeks to inspire the creation of concrete ones.
- A learning and designing community integrated and in synergistic relationship with its socio-ecological environment and aligned with the evolutionary dynamics.
- A community where there is both diversity of perspectives and common ground for creating a shared future.

- A learning community dedicated to self-directed evolutionary learning and action for the creation of sustainable and evolutionary futures.
- A system designed by learners and for learners to serve their own interests, passions, and commitments to the creation of a better world.

The following idealized operational definition of ELC is meant to serve as a useful definition for facilitating the design of ELC. It is comprised of a system of ten fuzzy guiding principles — expressed in terms of ideal standards, guiding questions, and markers. These elements inspire and guide the ongoing learning and design for moving the community in an evolutionary direction. What follows is a brief description of the ten fuzzy guiding principles:

- *Lifelong evolutionary learning:*
  The purpose of the community is to facilitate learning for the evolution of consciousness to enable conscious evolution.
- *Evolutionary ethic:*
  Decisions and choices with regard to learning, design, and action in the community seek to promote the greater good of individuals, societies, ecosystems, and future generations.
- *Partnership:*
  The community chooses to embody the partnership model of relations and promotes win-win dynamics within social systems and with their environment.
- *Environmental sustainability:*
  The learning, design, and action of the community seeks to ameliorate ecological damage, to promote sustainable development, and to learn to respect and to live in partnership with Earth.
- *Social responsibility:*
  The community advocates and embodies a culture of participation and shared responsibility for a more just and peaceful society.
- *Future orientation:*
  The community is committed to the creation of their future and to the protection of the right of future generations to engage in their own evolutionary learning and design.

- *Quality of life:*

  The community enjoys a life that is fulfilling, inwardly rich, and characterized by the presence of a holistic sense of wellbeing and happiness.

- *Flow:*

  Each individual finds ways to express his or her unique gifts and experiences optimal challenge while contributing to the emergence of sustainable and evolutionary futures.

- *Syntony:*

  The community "listens" to the dynamics of change of which they are a part and consciously participates in the creation of evolutionary consonance in all the endeavors in which they engage.

- *Wholeness and interconnections:*

  The community is aware of the interconnected and embedded nature of the world and strives toward wholeness.

These fuzzy guiding principles are a heuristic for the creation of the ideal image of concrete ELCs. Particular communities can self-organize around them. That is, they can interpret and define the meaning of these principles and can apply them in unique ways, and through their experiences and feedback, they can contribute to the evolution of these principles.

Ideal profile of the potential ELC designers

The second condition is the definition of the potential ELC designers. The ideal profile is comprised of ten attributes that define ELC designers as:

- *Lifelong learners:*

  Learning happens with everyone, everywhere, and always; it is a way of developing their potential, and a means for contributing to the development of their community.

- *Systems thinkers:*

  They understand interconnections, appreciate wholes, are attracted to complexity, and are able to find order in chaos.

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- *Environmentalists:*
  They do not see themselves as separate from nature, they see nature as sacred, are actively involved in raising ecological awareness, and promote ways to live simply and lightly with and in Earth.
- *Planetary citizens:*
  They see humanity as one family and the Earth as their home.
- *Authentic:*
  They are whole human beings, always becoming, with a strong identity and sense of being, and they feel connected to others rather than separate from them.
- *Empathetic:*
  They engage in "I-Thou" relationships with everyone and everything, and are passionate for community.
- *Creative:*
  They consider themselves creative and use imagination, knowledge, thinking, intuition, verbal and non-verbal communication, and metaphors to close gaps in understanding and to device alternatives when dissatisfied with the status quo.
- *Pragmatic:*
  They are good at making things happen through the integration of theory and practice in everyday life, and are committed to bringing about more humane and evolutionary possibilities.
- *Optimistic:*
  They are visionary, filled with hope and a sense of possibility, convinced that individuals and small groups of people can make a difference in the world.
- *Passionate:*
  They are enthusiastic, disciplined, committed to their work, playful and attracted to new challenges and to beauty.

These traits do not need to be considered prerequisites, but rather, they can be seen as areas of opportunity for learning and personal development in community. Although these are characteristics of individuals, it is important to emphasize that the

design of ELC is necessarily a collaborative effort. These overlapping and interrelated attributes, therefore, can be considered an ideal pool of dispositions that are desirable to have available in community. As a result, individuals in community can complement each other and together they can approximate this ideal profile. The profile is not meant as a suggestion toward the homogenization of community, but rather as the unifying elements in a diverse community.

ELC learning and design framework

The learning and design framework, or Evolutionary Systems Design (ESD), is a heuristic approach that seeks to enable conscious evolution. It consist of flexible processes and contents that each community can adapt and redesign to meet their needs and objectives (see figure 3). ESD involves:

Generative processes:

The processes through which the community learns to become and create itself as a healthy and authentic community. Through conversation, the members of the community learn to develop their individual authenticity and their collective potential.

Evolutionary learning processes:

Through evolutionary learning, the members of the community develop the competencies and sensitivities that can empower them as Evolutionary Systems Designers — capable of engaging in the creation of evolutionary communities. Evolutionary learning is guided by an agenda based on the stages of evolutionary development that goes from evolutionary consciousness to evolutionary praxis.

Strategic processes:

Strategic processes involve purposeful participatory future creating design. The community learn how to shape their social systems, create their future, and prepare for evolutionary action.

These three processes, characterized by community building, learning, design, and action, and woven together through conversation, are interrelated and support each other.
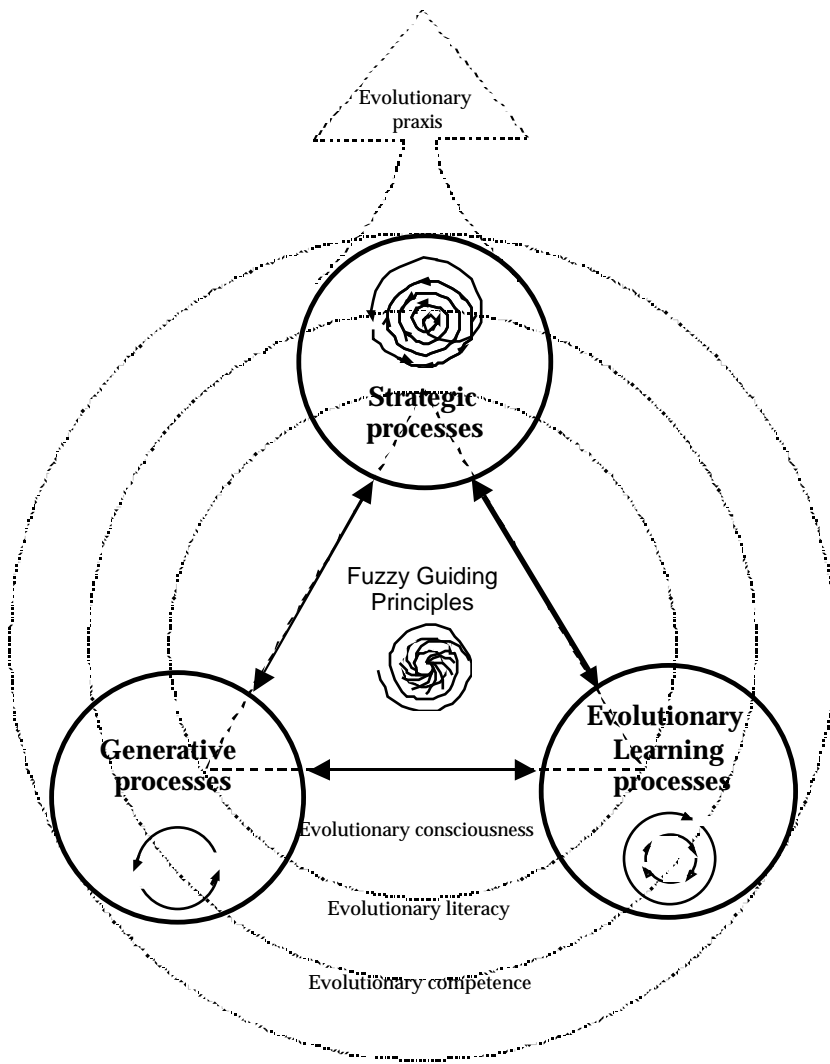
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Figure 3. ELC learning and design framework

The learning agenda that guides the learning, design, and action in the community is based on the four stages of evolutionary development, which are:

Evolutionary consciousness:

This stage involves the expansion of a self-centered consciousness in order to empathize with other beings and processes and to experience the interconnected nature of the universe. It also implies becoming aware of the processes of evolution of which we are a part in order to becoming co-creators of evolutionary pathways.

Evolutionary literacy:

This involves a grounded understanding of the evolving notions of evolution and of the processes that can empower us to participate consciously in it.

Evolutionary competence:

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Evolutionary competence is about developing the skills and abilities to act upon the awareness and understanding of the two previous stages and involves a process of self-empowerment as evolutionary systems designers.

Evolutionary praxis:

This stage marks the ongoing engagement with the world as evolutionary systems designers participating in conscious evolution.

Image of a concrete ELC

> *"'Mom, she is crying because she doesn't like school. And I don't like it either.'*
> *I knew what she meant. After being involved in the VessELCommunity, they were ruined for*
> *ordinary education. Their learning and development is just too important to be left in the hands*
> *of an institution whose values and methods are not appropriate for the challenges they face.*
> *Fortunately, the VessELCommunity is getting to a position where it may be able to offer an*
> *alternative to schooled education for my kids and other children in the community. I need to*
> *talk to Ngozi about this. I'm looking forward to this evolutionary learning and design journey."*
>
> — From the story "Our VessELCommunity"

I developed the fictional story of the VessELCommunity as a way of crystallizing an imaginary but possible real-world ELC. The VessELCommunity is a neighborhood based ELC — which is one of many possible types of ELC. The story seeks to describe the process of unfolding from vague idea to operational ELC. The dynamic image this story illustrated portrays how this particulr fictional ELC eventually establishes clear purposes and concrete projects and activities. The narrative is complemented by "notes" that the members of the VessELCommunity supposedly developed through their collaborative learning and design. These notes, which correspond to their particular ESD framework, include the models and other descriptions of the ideal image, purposes, functions, structure, context, and activities of the VessELCommunity and apply the knowledge produced through this dissertation research.

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"In systems such as contemporary society, evolution is always a promise and devolution always a threat. No system comes with a guarantee of ongoing evolution. The challenge is real. To ignore it is to play dice with all we have. To accept it is not to play God — it is to become an instrument of whatever divine purpose infuses the universe"

<div align="right">— Ervin Laszlo</div>

ELC is both a vision of a learning system and a new form of community. Networks of ELCs can become the tissue of a new society, of a new culture, embodying a partnership ethos with Earth. My dissertation points to the fact that ELC can be a vehicle for conscious evolution.

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