Chapter XVIII
Conversation for School Change:
Teachers' Experiences

Helga Stokes
Independent Researcher, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the chapter is to explore design conversation as it is lived out in the communication processes amongst stakeholders involved in school change and design of new learning environments. School reform efforts in various countries look for increased participation in design and decision-making at the local level. Design conversation, embedded in the theoretical framework of systems thinking and systems design has not, to date, been researched as a theoretical construct. Experiences and perceptions gathered in a phenomenological research study are presented. Data were gathered at three internationally dispersed sites in the Czech Republic, Germany, and the United States of America. The results indicate that teachers do value the process, describe changing mindsets, designing visions, concrete strategies, equitable participation, trust, and risk taking. The study hopes to lead those interested in school change to increased use and evaluation of design conversation in educational systems design.

INTRODUCTION

School reform is frequently mandated and designed with little or no user involvement. To better address learners' needs, stakeholder involvement in change efforts is promoted (Peck & Carr, 1997; Reigeluth & Garfinkle, 1994). This involvement requires communication amongst all those af-fected by such changes, a communication that results in making the learning environment more conducive to the learners' growth and development and leaves participants feeling content with the path they took towards reaching a common vision and achieving agreed upon outcomes.

This chapter focuses on the process and the underlying values of *design conversation*: in short,

the design of *design conversation,* as experienced by teachers in the context of school change and development of innovations in the learning environment, with stakeholder involvement. These experiences were gathered in an exploratory study conducted in 2005 (Stokes, 2006). In this chapter, selected experiences will be described and compared to the theoretical construct of design conversation, and implications for the practice of design conversation in the context of creating learning environments, as well as for further research, will be discussed.

DESIGN CONVERSATION: THE THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

The term *design conversation* entails two key processes: design and conversation. Design is a purposeful undertaking with the goal of creating a new entity. Banathy (1991) describes the design process as such:

Design is a creative, decision oriented, disciplined inquiry that aims to accomplish the following:

1. Diagnose and describe the design problem situation
2. Clarify the reason for engaging in design
3. Establish the boundaries of the design inquiry
4. Formulate core ideas, values, and an image of the future system that will guide the design
5. Define expectations, aspirations, purposes, and requirements of the system to be designed
6. Create and evaluate alternative representations of the future system
7. Establish criteria by which to evaluate alternatives
8. Using the criteria, select the most promising alternative
9. Describe the future system

10. Plan for the development of the system, based on its description

Conversation describes the communicative aspect. By bringing together the two terms, the act of designing becomes a group endeavor, not an undertaking by an individual expert. The term "conversation", as used here, entails values of a genuine participative democracy where hierarchies are flattened and stakeholders engage in a free-flowing exchange of thoughts, open sharing of information, and consensus seeking. Instead of an individual or a group promoting a platform or a pre-conceived plan to be implemented, all stakeholders join together in suitable forums, referred to by Banathy (2000) as the *Agoras of the 21st century,*[1] and offer their thoughts:

As the design conversation comes in contact with the consciousness of the community container, the collective mindfulness of the stakeholders is focused on creating, sustained in the design process by the thoughtful actions of all participants (Jenlink & Carr, 1996).

Jenlink (2004) reflects on the values and ethical principles that should guide the conversation. They include democratic practice and civic responsibility, inclusiveness, balance, overcoming dualisms and observing the system as a whole, a respectful, socially just discourse, critical reflection, historical awareness, deep listening, finding meaning in each others' contributions, and not clinging exclusively to one's own mindset.

Banathy (1996) foresaw such practice to be used for the design of social systems:

Social systems design is a process that carries a stream of shared meaning through a free flow of discourse among the stakeholders who seek to create a new system (p. 39).

He emphasizes a systems approach to designing a new entity. Design conversation is based in systems thinking (Banathy, 1991, 2000; von Bertalanffy, 1975; Hammond, 2002; Laszlo,

Related Content

Constructivist Learning Framework and Technological Application

Mabel C.P.O. Okojie, Tinukwa C. Boulderand James Boulder (2008). *Encyclopedia of Information Technology Curriculum Integration (pp. 150-156).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/constructivist-learning-framework-technological-application/16695

A Polling-at-Home Approach to Improving Students' Learning Performance

Jerry Chih-Yuan Sun, Helena Seli, Brandon Martinezand Yu-Yan Lin (2018). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 29-41).*

www.irma-international.org/article/a-polling-at-home-approach-to-improving-students-learning-performance/190844

Design of a Web-Based Sentence Analysis System to Support EFL Reading Instruction

Yea-Ru Tsaiand Yukon Chang (2015). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 11-22).*

www.irma-international.org/article/design-of-a-web-based-sentence-analysis-system-to-support-efl-reading-instruction/126976

Dialogues and Perception of Intersubjectivity in a Small Group

Mei-Chung Lin, Mei-Chi Chenand Chin-Chang Chen (2011). *International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design (pp. 1-19).*

www.irma-international.org/article/dialogues-perception-intersubjectivity-small-group/53546

Promoting Active Learning through a Flipped Course Design

Heather D. Hussey, Bethany K. B. Fleckand Aaron S. Richmond (2014). *Promoting Active Learning through the Flipped Classroom Model (pp. 23-46).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/promoting-active-learning-through-a-flipped-course-design/94406