

REGARDING THE PAPER BY RUSS ON “MESS MANAGEMENT”

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Russ' critique of search conferences can hardly be based on their failure to address the five phases he identifies as the superior mode of 'problem dissolution' i.e. 'design oriented planning'.

Search conferences were consciously designed to work through these phases since the 1959 design for Bristol-Siddeley. Plus, later, a sixth phase of generating a final report.

I do not think that subsuming search conferences under 'clinicalism' provides a basis for contrasting them with design-oriented planning. To me the obvious fact is that search conferences are one of the most significant and best tested means for achieving participative design-oriented planning. Participative design workshops are a complementary tool. They are more problem oriented, rather than concerned with the resolution of puzzles into manageable problem areas (as are search conferences), and hence are more designed around the use of special disciplinary skills. Russ fails to notice the difference (bottom, p. 8).

Russ' paper does not highlight the differences that seemed to emerge at our public debate in Wharton, December 1979.

I think there are two significant and persisting differences:

- a. Russ writes, p. 13, that "In sum, the design-oriented planner has a major responsibility for providing inputs to the planning process, etc." Our argument was much more specific about how major that responsibility should be. It is my experience with search conferences, as we design them, that the conference consultants do *not* have to be experts in the subjects matter of the conference and they do not have to be the inventors. The role does not call for a new generation of university graduates with S³ training. To insist otherwise seems to me to denigrate the ability of people to learn from their experiences, to learn from each other and to see what is going on around them. The problem solution given on p. 5 is a typical example of what commonsense can achieve – when it is not blinded by science.

- b. A lesser difference, may be, is that which arises from paragraph 1 and 2, p. 11. This is the relation of system and environment. Russ seems to see the environment as simply the ground in which the system takes on figural properties. The function of the initial phases of a search conference is to achieve a search conference is to get people to take the *environment as the figure* and, for a while, relegate their particular system to a class of such systems that are just a relatively undifferentiated ground – noise in the picture. This reversal of figure-ground relations is not easy to achieve, and people find it hard to accept it, initially as a useful exercise. For this reason the half-baked practitioners of search conferencing frequently demonstrate their uncooked state by dropping these two opening phases. A paper or a lecture by an expert on the environment will *not* produce a figure-ground reversal that the participants can then re-produce at will.

Design for human living is an exercise in open systems analysis, not something for an Edison (the inventor). An open system cannot be adequately characterized if we cannot characterise its environment. This latter we cannot do unless we are able to reverse our traditional habits of thought and perceive the figural properties of the environment. (This is a genuine distinction. The ground is never distinguished at more than the second level or order of interaction: the figure may be distinguished at up to five orders of interaction).

I do not see that Russ has proposed any method for participative design planning (my preferred description) that is competitive with or even supplementary to search conferences and participative design workshops.

Behind what could easily be taken as a special plea for the continuing role of the expert, and the trainers of such experts, is, I think, a very much deeper and universal concern. In the pursuit of the democratic ideal of participation will the Cotton Mathers of the New England town meetings be given the same play as those amongst us who are genuinely gifted and seek to serve? The search conference is designed to abort its mission if it gets stuck in the group emotion of dependency or fight-flight (the classic example is the international Search-Search conference, Canberra, 1976). This provides more protection from the demagogue than does what Russ describes as expert centred, designed-oriented planning.

I find nothing in this paper that helps my thinking.

Well, not quite. There is a prod to further thought in the debate and its less than adequate reflection in this paper. The great achievement of the search conference is that we now know how to get many groups into the group emotional state of pairing, and help them to stay there long enough to do creative work. Under the influence of this state people can accept really creative people to a degree that is not normally

possible. How far can this openness be used to gain social benefit from such rare talent?
