

A Rough Oak Tabletop



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Tuesday, November 8, 2016 -- Ben Smith

Editor's Note: *Peter Pula, founder of Axiom News, has been engaged in a series of conversations with community-builders from around the world with the intention of fostering Generative Communities. Ben Smith has been a regular participant in those calls. Here we share Ben's reflections after one of their most recent dialogues.*

Fostering generative community is filled with delicate paradoxes. One of those that seems to frustrate and confuse in turns is the role of tools. Which is it? Are there great tools that we can adapt to various communities in service of generativity or is each community so unique that we should abandon all tools and focus our effort on

refining our ability to sense and respond to each moment as it presents itself?

In one sense we are diving straight into the heart of one of life's fantastic dances: the dance between the general and specific. What might seem like a banal relationship — life's filled with a bunch of specific instances and we create general categories/strategies to handle them — turns out to be much more complicated upon inspection.

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Imagine a ceramic vase is standing on the table in front of you. Of course, the perception of a ceramic vase is itself a relationship between the general and specific. The categories “ceramic” and “vase”, whether perceived in terms of language or interpreted pre-linguistically are both general. Concepts that don't exist in any reality other than our minds. Concepts that are created and maintained through our interaction with and constant interpretation of the material world in an endless stream of specific experiences.

As we look closer and closer at our experience, the seemingly straightforward relationship of the general and the specific seems to disappear. In my interpretation, it turns out not that specific manifestations are instances of the general (=Platonic forms; it is the general that is really real), nor that the general is simply an abstraction imposed on the really real of the world we experience (something like Richard Rorty's). Within human experience, the general and the specific only exist in relationship to one another, because all we experience is what is meaningful (the specific) while meaning only emerges out of a relationship to general categories connected to past experience.

Maybe this is helpful. Maybe it's confusing and irrelevant. For me it helps to stop seeing in terms of general versus specific, in terms of tools versus sensing. It helps me look closer to see that at the level of microscopic interaction there's no separation to be found.

Yes, I can look at an oak tabletop, feel with my hand that it is unsmooth, note the undulations that time and weather have caused. But my interaction with the tabletop comes when I have a tool in my hand. A sanding block will, of course, get the job done, but it provides very little feedback and plumes of dust to boot. A well fettled smoothing plane, on the other hand, enhances this interaction, telling me about the top's grain, pleasing the eye and ear as whispery thin curls come rolling off the blade.

Tools and sensing are not a dichotomy, they are mutually constitutive elements of a dance. Good tools allow us to sense. Finely tuned senses help guide our tools.

That might help explain why I'm both a presence junkie and a tool addict.