

Co-creating Generative Space in Community

Image



'You don't analyze and engineer a generative space. You host and you convene and you narrate.'

What's it take to co-create and hold a generative space in community? What questions do we start with? What are the design constraints to generate real, felt change? How does individual agency fit in? What's the place of analyzing and engineering versus hosting and narrating a generative space?

Peter Pula of Axiom News explored these and related questions in a dialogue with friend and colleague, Bill Templeman, who also happens to be an active community leader in his own right.

This is an edited and condensed version of a portion of the dialogue.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

Bill and Peter in conversation at the Axiom News studio.

We begin with Peter's response to Bill's comment on how holding a generative field is diametrically opposed to a system identifying and then committing to a series of actions that are intended to create a set of predetermined results.

Peter: Compelling people to buy into a pre-conceived idea of what should happen is going to stifle any of the real possibility that comes from people actually being in community with each other and looking to what wants to be born.

So deciding what I want to have accomplished in six months does not necessarily comport with what wants to be born.

Bill: So all of these community initiatives of wanting to have less homelessness and more jobs, for example, they're doomed because people come into the room with, "We want less homelessness, we want more jobs."

Peter: Well, that's a whole other question: What question do we start with? You can either say, "I want to reduce homelessness."

Or you can focus on what you would rather have than homelessness.

If you focus on a problem and you design around a problem and you build actions around a problem, what you're more likely going to get...

Bill: Is more problems.

Peter: Is more of the problem.

You feed that energy when you're focusing on the problem. Whereas you could say, "What would I rather was happening?" Paint a picture of that. "These are the things we would like to be experiencing. If you'd like to be experiencing these similar things, come into conversation with us and we'll see what happens."

When you show up with your gifts and somebody else shows up with their gifts and someone else shows up with their gifts, you can't predict. Each person is a walking universe. You can't predict what happens when universes collide.

Bill: There was a wonderful interview a few years ago on CBC Radio with one of Canada's foremost jazz harmonica players. He went up to a First Nations community in Northern Quebec that was having these horrific problems with youth sniffing gas. He went up with pockets full of harmonicas, and he got kids playing harmonicas.

Peter: Generative harmonica playing.

Bill: Yeah. Now what's this have to do with the gas sniffing? Well, when the kids are playing harmonica and finding out more about jazz, they're not sniffing gas.

Peter: That's a great story that makes that point. Here's someone who's got a gift for playing harmonica, possibly teaching it. He's passionate about that, he invited people into that space, and that's a generative space where people are learning, they're connecting, they're playing, they're actually creating something together. That shifts systems.

But if you go up there with a team of highly qualified social workers and drop them in to do a process so that youth stop sniffing gas, probably you're going to create more disempowerment, you're going to create a sense of empire coming in to interfere, there is no co-creation, and you're in there to solve a problem.

Bill: Yes.

Now, decades ago, when I was in graduate school, (I reached a point) where I no longer wanted to play in a space where ideas were batted about for their own sake.

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How is this idea of holding a generative field being positioned so that it's going somewhere in the real world as opposed to becoming this thing for another thesis? What does it have to do with the school board or the parkway or local politics or these other community changes I want to see?

Peter: I think that's one of the reasons that things that have come out of the [Peterborough Dialogues](#) (a community initiative of Axiom News) are now finding traction out there. We know, for example, that many community conversations mimic some of the things we did in the Dialogues. And that's a shift in how we do advocacy, it's a shift in how we gather. It moves from power over or even lining our power up against someone else's power into power with. So that's a shift that's come out of here.

Then we look at things like the Peterborough Pollinators. This is a group of about 30 to 50 people who are now involved in creating local pollinator gardens. We could have never imagined that these things were going to come out of the foundational conversations of the Peterborough Dialogues.

But I think one of the reasons they have come out of and actually landed in the community is because there's a deliberate intention around limiting ideas for idea's sake.

It's an old game to be a brilliant ideas guy and hang out with brilliant ideas people and put all our ideas together in a nice, pretty picture.

But what we do in the Dialogues is ensure always that we're talking about citizenship, we're talking about what is possible given the people in the room and the materials at hand. Those are design constraints that limit all of this highfalutin', aspirational, intellectual visioning to, "What can we actually do right now?"

Bill: How does firing individual agency fit into this? Because without agency, as we both know, we can have great conversations but nothing happens.

Peter: There's an all-important question that I will credit my learning the value of it to my relationship with Ben Smith. Ben has taught us a lot about how to host small group conversations and an all important question is, "What's next?"

But that what's next question has to come a long ways down the conversational path. So first I express and become in touch with my own intention, with my own giftedness, and with others in the room, their intentions and their giftedness. Then we ask, "What would we like to create together and what's next?" The what's next could be something as simple as, "We will meet again at this time next Thursday."

If you keep working that cycle of connecting with each other, discussing what's alive, discussing what you're learning, asking what's next, asking what we want to create together, eventually the thing that wants to be born is going to find its way into manifestation in the community.

However, if instead we say, "Now we have the grand plan, we have all of our collective impact agreements, we have all of our strategies, now we're going to go implement this on the community." What that actually enables you to do is to park and dissociate from what's actually really possible. It becomes a surrogate for real action.

Bill: It's interesting you say that because one of the frustrations still with the Dialogues process is that what's next. There are these lovely generalities or these heartfelt, "I'm going to do such and such," and nothing happens.

Peter: So there was a time when I was hosting 11 conversations or dialogues or summits a week.

Bill: You were going crazy.

Peter: I was going crazy, but it was a very powerful experience to watch because as you're connecting and you're being seen and you're being energized by what you're seeing as real possibility, it's quite easy to then say, "I'm going to do this and I'm going to do this." So you declare all these things you're going to do.

But if you watch, some people will be reticent and careful, other people will be so enthusiastic about now having been seen and feeling this new sense of energy that they'll commit to all kinds of things, and then they don't deliver.

And I think that's actually okay.

I think what happens is some people start to realize, "Hmm, I keep committing and I don't follow through. So I'm going to be more careful about what I'm going to commit to."

Because there's also this culture of busyness. "I need to be able to show that I'm busy and I'm important."

So that often causes us to commit to doing a whole pile of things.

The other thing that happens is that community members start to see in other community members whether or not I can take that person as one who is going to actually see the thing through. And that gets to agency, too.

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What I've enjoyed watching is that people will get a spark of a commitment they want to make, and then they won't actually necessarily see it through. But they're still welcomed back in the circle. They go through the work again, and slowly but surely we chip away at that un-carved block to find the thing that I'm actually ready to do.

Bill: You've talked in the past about letting go of these lists of bullet points and really only achieving one or two things - the one or two things that have power. Whereas my school of consulting taught me you develop a long list and send it back to the client and you both sign off on it and away you go.

Peter: Well, and the other thing that happens is that those decisions become inorganic.

Essentially you're saying, "Right now in order to meet my accountabilities and to be well-evaluated I have to fit myself into that tick box." Okay, well, what if there's a new energy or even a new person or maybe the environment shifts? But I am now going to stick with that box because I want to make sure that something happened. So you actually stifle and kill life by becoming so bent on filling in those boxes that the thing that actually is sitting right in front of you that could actually happen and could shift the system and create trust and cultivate the conditions for transformative change get squashed. And that's our heads doing that stuff.

Analyzing and engineering a generative community and space isn't going to work. You don't analyze and engineer. You host and you convene and you narrate. And you narrate because things are going to happen other than what you thought the original idea was. So you go in one circle or one summit, and come out with, "This is an idea we're going to step into." We try it but then something else comes to us because we provoked it by action. So our first try isn't necessarily the thing that wanted to happen, it's the thing that gets us closer to what wanted to happen. So it's a long game, and it's not an event. It's a series of conversations over a long period of time with narrators involved who are monitoring and telling stories of what's actually happening so that we can constantly readjust and re-engage.

- More to Come

For stories from the Peterborough Dialogues, visit www.peterboroughdialogues.media.