Reflections on the New Agoras Project: A Fuschl Conversation

Angela Espinosa
Stuart Umpleby
Outline

• The New Agoras Project
• Method and results of the Fuschl team
• Related research traditions
• A comparison with the Institute of Cultural Affairs
• The syntegration method
• Other efforts and their websites
The new agoras project

• Create evolutionary design communities
• Local level – local groups design ideal futures facilitated by a steward
• Steward level – stewards exchange ideas among each other and local agoras
• Linkage level – agora groups exchange ideas in cyberspace
Description of a local agora

• 7-12 people who can meet regularly
• Intention of creating an image of an ideal future society they would like to inhabit
• Employs a design methodology
• Includes one or more stewards
• Ensures that discussion in the public sphere is facilitated by systemic methodologies
The method used at Fuschl

- Definition of purpose
- Identification of values
- Definition of functions
- Definition of clients and doers
- Next steps
Definition of purpose

“Creating a community that collects and promotes the experiences of existing communities or organizations that have been successful in developing participative dialogue for achieving... progress toward a better society... moving toward becoming a steward system that links to the best of systems thinking ideas”
Identification of values

- Exchange knowledge
- Create knowledge
- Create an open environment for critique
- Respect local and global and cultural wisdom
- Use available knowledge and inquiry
- Adopt an evolutionary consciousness
- Promote cultural exchange and access to cultural resources
Definition of functions

• Develop an internet supported knowledge base on the agoras’ experiences and learnings
• Support the learning process in agoras with useful methods and tools
• Facilitate knowledge sharing and learning by interested communities or institutions
Defining clients and doers

• The clients for these services would be community activists and organizers; managers, consultants, and technicians; and concerned citizens and researchers

• The doers or the steward community would include the members of this team, a website administrator, communities or organizations wanting to share their knowledge
Next steps

• Continue to define the functions, with emphasis on creating a website
• Write a research proposal to obtain the necessary funds
• Explore linkages to related social system design activities
Related research traditions

• Organizational behavior and development
• Open space methods
• Organizational learning, interactive planning, second order cybernetics
• The viable system model and syntegration
• Design architecture to build a knowledge base resulting from inquiries
Origins of the Agoras project vs. ICA

- Started in the 1980s or 1990s
- Origin in a school of education, B.H. Banathy at Saybrook
- Intent is to encourage people to take responsibility for cultural evolution

- Started in 1970s based on work in 50s & 60s
- Origin in World Council of Churches, Joe Mathews
- Intent is to live the teachings of The Bible, help the poorest of the poor
Agoras project vs. ICA

• A goal is to share ideas developed in agora conversations via the internet

• Supporting literature is from education, evolutionary theory, systems science

• Develop methods that people can use to define visions and work to achieve them

• Supporting literature is a mixture of secular and religious writers
Agoras project vs. ICA

- Emphasis is on envisioning an ideal state and modelling it prior to action
- Assumes that new visions will lead to actions. People have a right to be involved in designing their future

- Emphasis is on designing a course of action to be implemented
- Assumes that a group, working together, can accomplish things that individuals cannot
Steps in Agoras project vs. ICA

- Transcend the existing system
- Envision an ideal system
- Design the transformation of the present to the ideal
- Display models of the system designed
- Plan implementation of the design

- Define the shared vision
- Identify obstacles to achieving the vision
- Formulate strategies to remove the obstacles
- Identify tactics to implement the strategies
- Define actions – who does what, when, and how to implement the tactics
Agoras project vs. ICA

- Imagine ideal worlds and think about cultural evolution
- Levels of participation local level, steward level, linkage level
- The stewardship group of facilitators has been meeting at Asilomar
- Create “images of possibility” and learn by doing
- Three groups – people in communities, full time staff, volunteers
- Summer research assemblies review programs, strategies, and methods
Financing of Agoras project vs. ICA

• Largely self-financed as a part-time activity of academics
• Local agoras are self-funded. Leaders are volunteers

• Initially self-financed with additional support from people, govt, and foundations
• Funding from UNESCO, World Bank, corporations, churches
Agoras project vs. ICA

- The stewards are the resource people
- The Asilomar Conversations and the Fuschl Conversations have resulted from these efforts
- Primarily an intellectual exercise
- Local people who can provide resources are involved in planning
- Many community groups, day care centers, and business have been created
- Help people learn how to improve their lives
Agoras project vs. ICA

- Well connected to the academic community, especially the field of education
- Not yet much writing about results. People are encouraged by their conversations
- Widely known about churches, NGOs and development org.s such as the W. Bank
- A great deal of writing about results – project descriptions, stories, anecdotes, evaluations
The syntegration method

- Facilitates participation and dialog and emergence of social consciousness
- Helps to balance the views of those managing organizational tasks with those focusing on external issues
- Leads to sharing of information and knowledge
Other efforts and their websites

• National Conference on Dialogue and Deliberation
• Dynamic Facilitation
• Mary Parker Follett Foundation (funding)
• Deliberative Democracy Consortium
• Institute of Cultural Affairs
• Co-Intelligence Institute
• World Future Society and IFSF
Questions about the new agoras project

• Is there an intent to involve people other than academics?

• Are people more motivated to discuss ideal futures or to improve their organizations and communities?

• Does a deductive approach work better in Europe and an inductive approach work better in the US?