

*The Making of a New Culture:  
Learning Conversations and  
Design Conversations in Social Evolution*

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**1 A POSSIBLE DIRECTION**

Even a cursory glance at the impact humankind is having on the life support systems of planet Earth makes patent the unsustainability of contemporary cultures of consumption. Creating a new culture through learning and design conversations is not a quest of foolish arrogance – it is the survival imperative for sustainable co-existence of humankind with planet Earth. Societies all around the world are currently experiencing a period of rapid and extensive transformation. The signs of change are pervasive, and the rate of change is itself changing and accelerating, speeding contemporary societies toward a critical threshold of stability and engulfing the individual in a confusing blur of behavioral choice. Global flows of information, energy, trade, and technology are swept up in massive economic reforms and political reorientations with the result of creating a disorienting and disrupting vortex of social and cultural change on both local and global levels.

Nevertheless, we need not be victims of change, destined for one future or another according to either a predetermined plan or random chaos. Both individually and collectively, *we can learn how to have change happen through us, not to us!* But we must find out how to look, listen, and learn — to *really* see and hear and understand the underlying patterns of change so that we can distinguish between those dynamics that are destabilizing and those that forward sustainable futures. The sharp discontinuity between where we — as not the most unobtrusive species on Earth — are going and where we *should be* going is underscored by the need for new ways of thinking, new ways of learning, and new ways of conversing. As Lester W.

Milbrath (1989), wrote in his book on *Envisioning a Sustainable Society: Learning Our Way Out*

As a society, have to learn better how to learn — I call it *social learning*; it is the dynamism for change that could lead us to a new kind of society that will not destroy itself from its own excesses... for we must share a vision for a new society before we can realize it. Designing a better society and maintaining a good life require deep thought and sustained effort by all of us. Reasoning together is the only way we can bring it about. (pp. 6 & 1)

Reasoning together, conversing together, searching together. The challenge is nothing short of the collective consideration of a radical transformation of the social systems which embody our attitudes and dispositions. “Our goal,” as Milbrath saw it over twelve years ago, “will be to design a new society that provides a decent quality of life while coexisting in a long-run sustainable relationship with the natural environment that nourishes it” (*ibid.*, xi). Not only is this goal entirely relevant to current design conversations around the world, it has increased in urgency as the years have passed. Indeed, it must no longer be considered a side conversation, relegated to conferences and classrooms. This is *The Conversation* for being and becoming with our world.

When we engage in conversation with each other, if we do so authentically and inclusively, we end up also conversing internally — with ourselves, as well as externally — with the more-than-human world of which we are a part. Through multi-faceted reflection on where we stand, where those who surround us stand, and where we would like to be, we are brought inexorably to a consideration of our ethics. We may find that we and our dearest (and not so dear) acquaintances tend to be more of the take-make-waste worldview than of the syntony-quest worldview. Although, as we will see, this may be neither pleasant nor reassuring, such awareness marks the first step toward transcendence. Here, at the threshold of conscious evolution and the capacity to creatively contribute to evolutionary consonance, we need to step back, take a look at what is happening in the “big picture,” and find ourselves somewhere there. How are we contributing to that big picture? Are we over there with those who are

heedlessly stamping down this earth, or over here, with the mindful walkers and insightful listeners?

Carolyn Merchant (in Hinman, 1996, p. 516), author of *Environmental Ethics and Political Conflict*, distinguishes among three approaches to environmental ethics:

An *egocentric ethic* is grounded in the self and based on the assumption that what is good for the individual is good for society. A *homocentric ethic* is grounded in society and based on the assumption that policies should reflect the greatest good for the greatest number of people and that, as stewards of the natural world, humans should conserve and protect nature for human benefit. An *ecocentric ethic* is grounded in the cosmos, or whole environment, and is based on the assignment of intrinsic value to nonhuman nature. This threefold taxonomy may be useful in identifying underlying ethical assumptions in cases where ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest develop among entrepreneurs, government agencies, and environmentalists.

There is also a fourth stage, a truly transcendent and evolutionary level of ethical consideration that should serve as the basis for self-directed sustainable change efforts. It is what can be called evolutionary ethics. Without a doubt, ecocentric ethics assigns intrinsic value to “the whole environment, including inanimate elements, rocks, and minerals along with animate plants and animals.” (Merchant in Hinman, 1996, p. 524). But it is still synchronic, considering “the big picture” only at any one point in time. An evolutionary perspective needs to infuse this ethic to make it sustainable in the long run. Otherwise it is just optimizing *what is*, not working in stewardship of *what should be*.

Years ago, C. H. Waddington anticipated the challenge for conversations based in an evocentric ethic. He pointed out that “we have found ourselves faced by a series of problems — atomic warfare, the population explosion, the food problem, energy, natural resources, pollution and so on — each complex enough in itself, but then it turns out that each of these is only one aspect of, as it were a Total Problem, in which all aspects of the world’s workings are inter-related.” (in Merry, 1995, p. 78). This is what others, such as the Club of Rome, have termed the *global problematique*, and as Waddington suggests, it must be considered as a continually

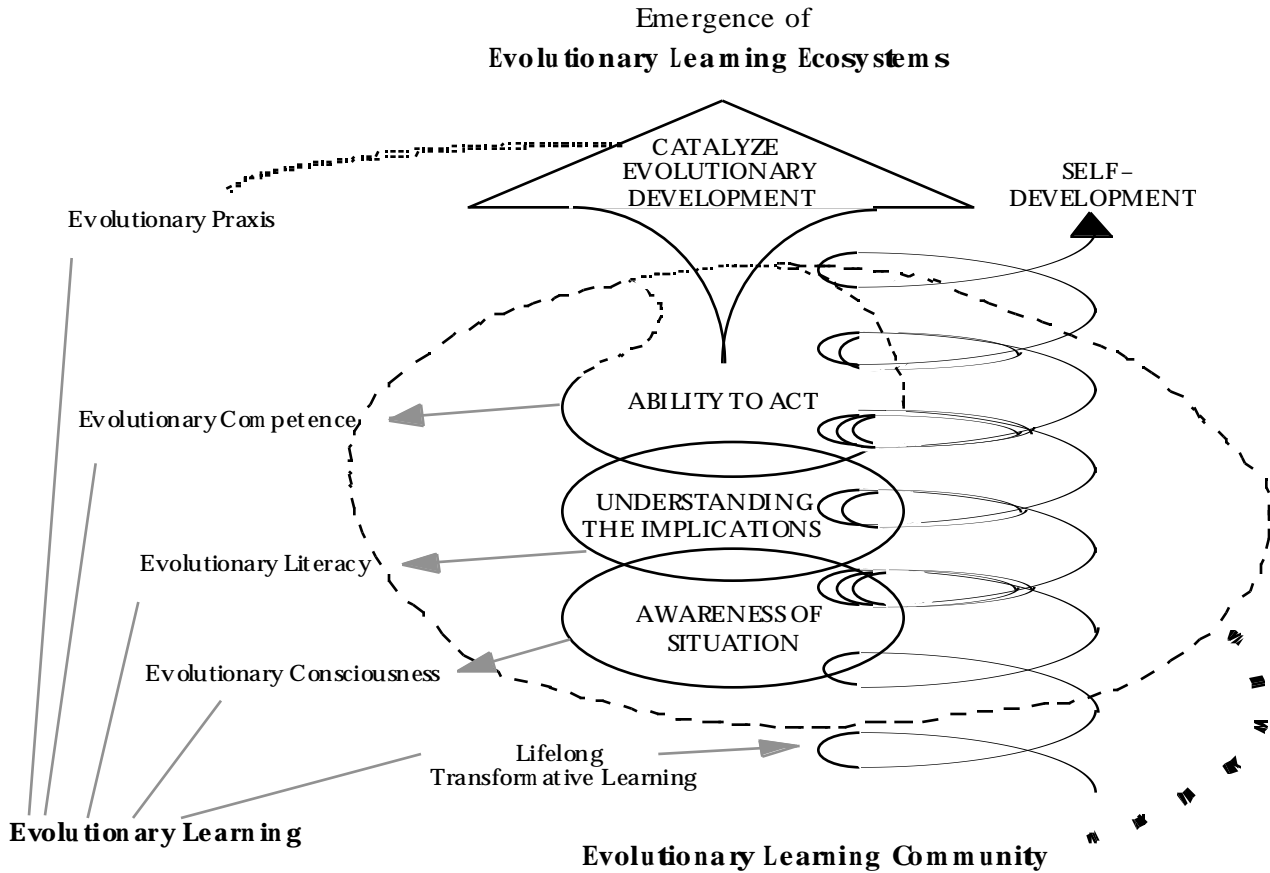
unfolding condition. An ecocentric ethic simply will not bear up to the challenge of dealing with it (much less a homocentric ethic, while an egocentric ethic can only make it worse). The time is nigh for societal design conversations based on an evocentric ethic.

## 1.1 The Vision of a Sustainable and Evolutionary Future

Culture cannot be purposefully planned. It arises out of the confluence of values, beliefs, ideas, and forms of expression characteristic of interpersonally aligned individual cognitive maps. That is to say, it arises from a community. Through the development and application of Evolutionary Systems Design (in all its dimensions of philosophy, theory, and practice), action oriented systems thinkers of today can engage in condition creating conversations that set the stage for the emergence of tomorrow's culture of design. This conversation objective leads down a path of inquiry framed in a normative evolutionary perspective. The approach to bringing forth a design culture draws on the principles that underlie the patterns of change described by all complex dynamic systems with a throughput of information and energy. As such, a sustainable design culture is conceived to emerge when conditions for individual and group empowerment are consciously created in a framework that incorporates evolutionary understanding. Evolutionary Systems Design (ESD) is key to the gaining of such understanding since it is firmly based on the acquisition of evolutionary competence: the state of self-actualization (of individuals and groups) that is marked by the mastery of the knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and values required for co-evolutionary actions, and therefore, for the pursuit of sustainable modes of being.

An evocentric conversation dynamic leads through four stages of evolutionary learning: 1) creating AWARENESS of the need for a design culture through promoting Evolutionary Consciousness; 2) constructing an UNDERSTANDING of evolutionary design through developing Evolutionary Literacy; 3) generating a sense of RESPONSIBILITY that is matched by the change competence of RESPONSABILITY as we learn to affect purposeful, positive, co-evolutionary change in the communities with which we work/play/learn, and thereby gain Evolutionary Competence; and 4) learning how to become CATALYSTS of desirable evolutionary

change in social systems through engaging in Evolutionary Praxis with communities open to transformative learning. These stages are represented in Figure 1, below.



**Figure 1. The four learning stages of evocentric conversation**

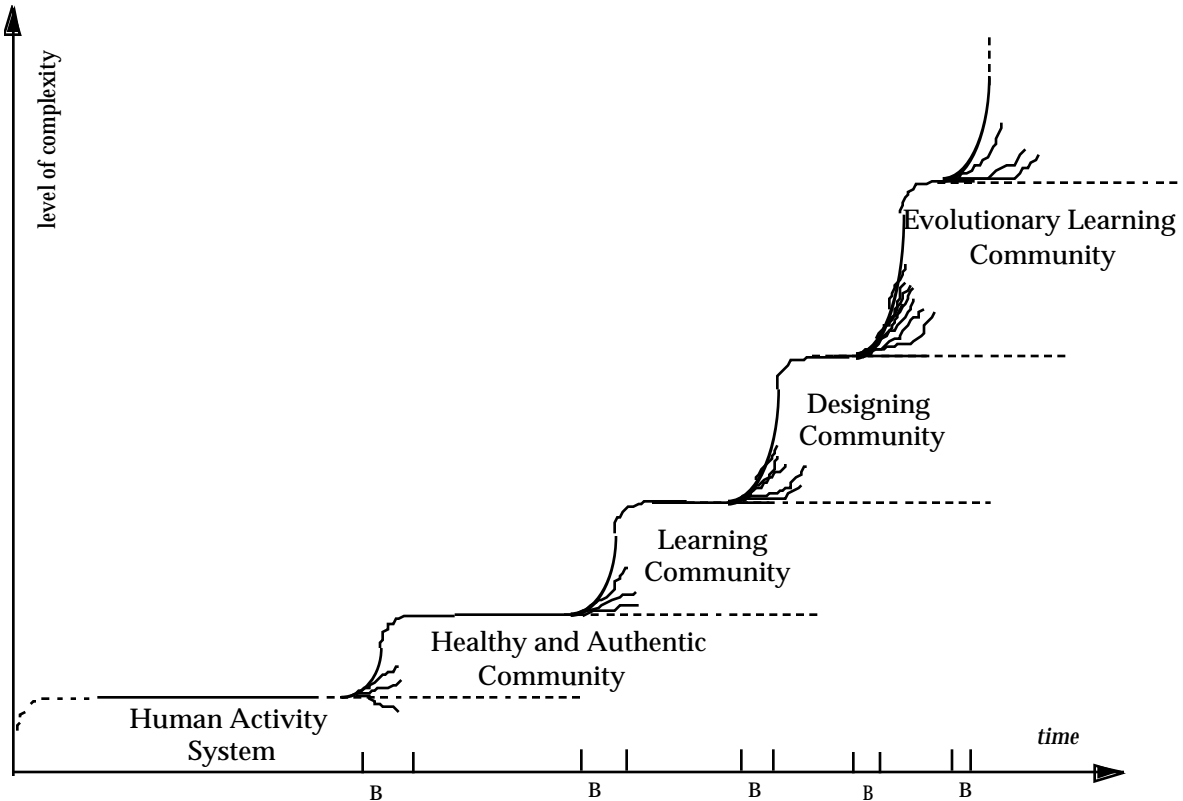
1. Evolutionary learning is a core aspect of ESD conversation. Recent development of the above portrayed operational learning framework for the stages through which individuals and groups pass as they become evolutionary change agents has provided a scaffolding for Evolutionary Systems Designers to gauge their progress (A. Laszlo 2000).

With its focus on the development of evolutionary competence, the Evolutionary Learning Community (ELC) serves as the vehicle of choice for such searching together conversations. By engaging in participatory processes of learning how to learn in harmony with the dynamics of its physical and socio-cultural milieu, the ELC does not adapt its environment to its needs, nor does it simply adapt to its environment. Rather, it adapts *with* its environment in a dynamic of mutually sustaining evolutionary co-creation. Through such a process, individuals and groups can self-empower for the creation of responsible ecosystemic transformation in whatever community they choose to join. When one or more Communities of ELCs (or ELC Ecosystems) begins to appear, this in effect, marks the emergence an authentic Design Culture.

Through this process of future-creating conversation a vision of a sustainable and evolutionary future can be developed.

## **2 HOW DO WE GET FROM THERE TO HERE?**

The evolution of evolutionary learning community is a purposeful process that starts with the creation of a Healthy and Authentic Community from any Human Activity System (Checkland, 1993) that is a willing participant in the learning and design process. The formation of a Healthy and Authentic Community is facilitated through a process of generative dialogue and is dedicated to creating the appropriate context for collaborative learning and design. When the community is ready to make the commitment to become a Learning Community, the members engage in a process of learning-how-to-learn that includes the development of evolutionary consciousness and evolutionary literacy, as described above. By subsequently developing evolutionary competence, the learning community can design itself into a Designing Community capable of continuous autopoietic re-creation as a community. This process of evolutionary learning creates the conditions for evolutionary praxis. Through the integration of ideals and actions, the individuals and the community become fully empowered as stewards of their ongoing evolution. The evolutionary path from Healthy and Authentic Community to Evolutionary Learning Community can be represented as follows:

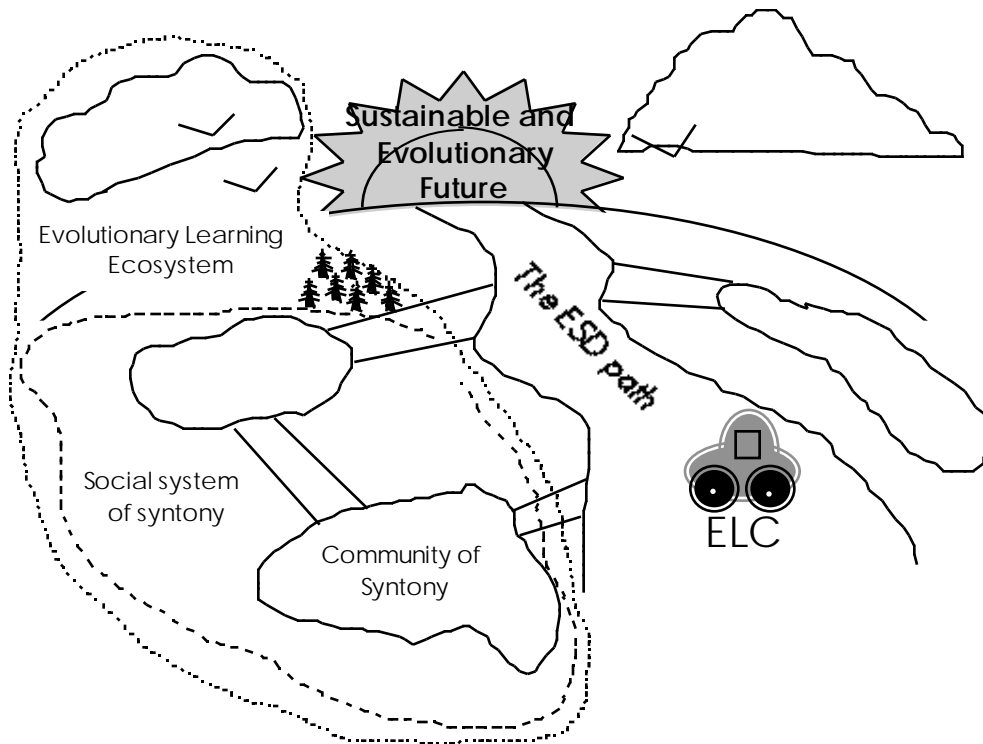


note: B refers to Bifurcation

**Figure 2. The evolution of Evolutionary Learning Community**

Because the conversations focus on issues of learning and applying in real-world contexts, ELCs serve as the catalyzers other systems of syntony. These range from communities of syntony, to social systems of syntony, and eventually to entire ecosystems of syntony. Figure 3 portrays how ELC serves as the vehicle for the generation of these additional stages. The first type of ELC is the community of syntony. Such communities are dedicated to learning how to learn and consciously seek to do so in ways that are evolutionary. At the next level, social systems of syntony are formed from various sorts of individual ELCs, each collaborating to create a subculture of syntony. Those social systems of syntony that have developed their full

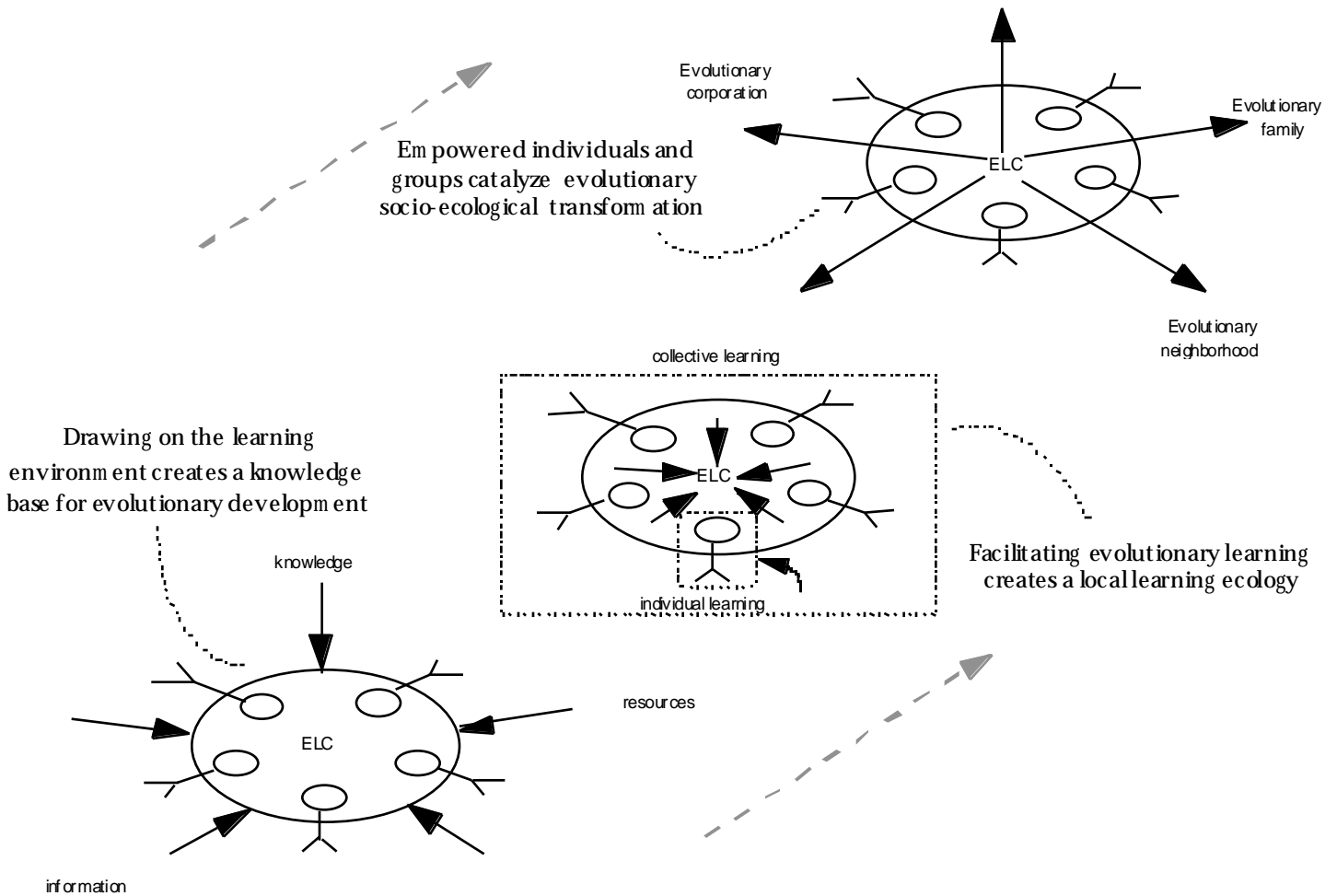
evolutionary potential have attained a degree of evolutionary competence that permits them to engage with their more-than-human world in the creation of greater ecosystems of syntony. These form evolutionary learning ecosystems (ELEs).



**Figure 3. Nested Systems of Syntony**

Groups of people engaged in purposeful ESD conversations form an evolutionary learning community, and such communities can foster the emergence of other systems of syntony. At the level of the ELE, people no longer ‘come first’ — the whole ecosystem comes first. All aspects of the ELE, from psycho-personal and socio-cultural to bio-physical and process-structural — all are ‘actors’ with a voice in the creation of evolutionary consonance or syntony (*cf.*, A. Laszlo 2000). All listen to and create with one another. These ELEs are, of course, communities as well; ones in which people act as stewards of their

own futures in syntony with their dynamic surroundings. Figure 4 depicts how ELC facilitates the emergence of systems of syntony within and beyond itself.



**Figure 4. The Process of ELC Empowerment**

By manifesting an evolutionary consciousness, ELEs are embodiments of syntony. They draw on an expanded conception of

self that leads to empathetic identification with others — including non-human others. Such an inclusive self-concept fosters understanding and love for other people, species, and future generations. It helps us learn to ‘think like a mountain,’ in Aldo Leopold's wonderful phrase. Evolutionary consciousness of this sort creates less need for ethical guidelines on protecting and preserving nature — it would be just natural to do so. This kind of thinking leads to actions that are empathetic and inclusive, giving voice to such sentiment as John Seed once showed: I'm not working to protect the rainforest, I'm part of the rainforest, in human form, protecting itself. To be human and to express such more-than-human identity and volition in future creating design conversations suffuses the processes with an ethic of appropriateness that marks a truly evolutionary state of consciousness.

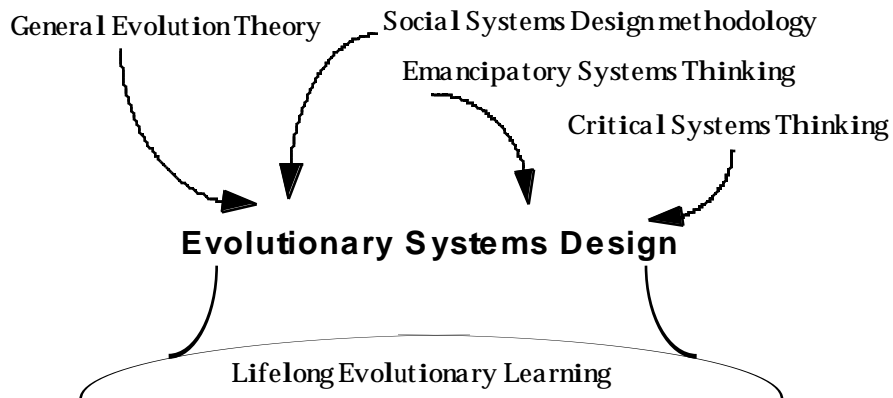
ESD provides a clear presentation of the importance of learning for the purposeful design of the future. As a conversation approach for realizing the vision of a sustainable and evolutionary *learning* society, ESD offers a means of recreating the ancient Greek ideal of a *paidea* — a society where the promotion of lifelong learning and the achievement of the human potential in the broadest sense is a central priority (Milbrath 1989, 94). The *paidea* of the future are social systems of syntony where the vehicle of conversation for facilitating evolutionary learning and transformation is the ELC.

## 2.1 The role of Evolutionary Systems Design

While Social Systems Design (SSD) can be characterized as a form of soft systems thinking primarily serving Habermasian practical interests (Jackson 1991), Evolutionary Systems Design (ESD) is conceived as an attempt to evolve SSD into a form of critical systems thinking by also serving an emancipatory interest. This means that ESD draws from wellsprings of soft systems thinking, critical systems thinking, and emancipatory systems thinking in addition to General Evolution Theory and lifelong evolutionary learning orientations. The result is a humanistically oriented systems approach comprised of a meta-methodology that facilitates the critical application of various systems perspectives to real-world situations (Laszlo & Krippner 1998, 59).

ESD defies classification as constituting either an epistemology or an ontology. Rather, it is reminiscent of the Greek notion of *gnosiology* concerned with the holistic and integrative exploration of phenomena and events. There are aspects of ESD that are ontological and aspects that are epistemological, and aspects that are at once both and should not be circumscribed to either.

Much as with TSI (Total Systems Intervention, *cf.*, Flood & Jackson 1991), those engaged in ESD conversations must select or design appropriate approaches for addressing their particular purposes. Rather than consider the application of ESD on philosophical grounds, designing communities face practical challenges for socio-ecological survival and must learn to move “toward what will work to provide answers where no reliable guides exist” (Salner 1996, 8). This does not mean that ESD is methodologically eclectic or that it disregards the need for a coherent body of theory to inform its practice. By empowering evolutionary agents neither as activists nor as theorists, but as a synthesis of the two, it offers a way — an integral path — for human becoming in partnership with Earth. Figure 5 illustrates the key conceptual influences upon ESD.



**Figure 5. Conceptual Influences on ESD**

Various thinkers have identified complementary learning objectives relevant to the creation of sustainable and evolutionary futures: Donald Michael’s (1973) psychological barriers to be overcome for future oriented societal change; C.A. Bower’s (1993) educational changes for embracing sustainability; Alfonso Montuori’s (1989)

ideas on the creative elicitation of the future; Dean Elias's (1997) learning for expansion of consciousness; Lester Milbrath's (1989) learning tasks for a sustainable society; and Robert Ornstein's (1991) and Ornstein and Ehlich's (1989) ideas on conscious evolution. By drawing on the orientations put forth by these thinkers, and infusing them with Bela H. Banathy's (1996) agenda for evolutionary learning, it is possible to engage in future creating design conversations that create operational outcomes in line with the four stage learning framework described in section 1.1, above (*cf.*, A. Laszlo, 2000: "The Epistemological Foundations of Evolutionary Systems Design").

### 3 CONVERSATION: THE HOLDING PROCESS

Two complementary modes of dialogue comprise design conversation: generative dialogue and strategic dialogue (Banathy 1996, 218). One provides a process through which individuals become friends and partners and a community generates common meaning in learning conversations. The other focuses on particular tasks in the creation of solutions for a specific social circumstance in design conversations.

Generative dialogue can be considered as the core transformative process for a group to become an authentic community. Banathy suggests that the involvement in generative dialogue "will lead to the creation of collective consciousness, collective inquiry that focuses on the thoughts, values, and worldviews of the group and creates a flow of shared meaning, shared perceptions, a shared worldview, and a social milieu of friendship and fellowship" (1996, 219). Once the community has bonded, and if there also exists the intention and the commitment, they can then enter into strategic dialogue through a focus on communal activities future oriented design. When dialogue consists of collective learning and coordinated action, paradigm exploration, cultural healing, and collective creation inspired by a shared vision of the future (Isaacs in Banathy 1996, 217), the community is on its way to become one of *learning and design*.

As with the entire ESD conversation process, the willing adoption of a learning orientation is an essential aspect. To seek the transcendence of our differences and to promote co-creation is a path toward higher complexity and wholeness. It is a syntony quest, that is, a creative aligning and tuning with the evolutionary processes of which we are a part, and as such, a contribution to the evolution of consciousness and the creation of new possibilities for the future. This is lifelong learning. In face of the planetary challenges of our time, this is the most extraordinary common conversation in which we can engage.

### **3.1 From Traditional Community through Surrogate Community, Learning Community, Healthy and Authentic Community, and Evolutionary Learning Community to Community of Syntony, and Other Models of the Evolution of Designing Communities through Conversation**

In its most fundamental conception, community can be considered “a group of two or more individuals with a shared identity and a common purpose committed to the joint creation of meaning.”(Laszlo & Laszlo, 1997, p. 6). Authentic communities are able to enhance their own development while at the same time enhancing that of each individual in the community, thereby promoting both freedom of personal choice and a sense of responsibility for the whole. In such communities, the operating principle is that of unity in diversity.

There are different types of communities and attention to their distinct characteristics helps clarify the particular orientation of ELC. Four types of communities are relevant for this consideration: Traditional Community, Surrogate Community, (simple) Learning Community, and Evolutionary Learning Community (McCormick, et. al, 1998)..

**Traditional Community (TC):** A closed, stable system where the individual’s identity is determined by a collective identity rooted in transmitted myths, values, norms, rituals, and beliefs. That is, an individual born within this kind of community is socialized into the local culture. Many indigenous communities are good examples of traditional communities. They are natural rather than designed communities. In many cases, change within this type of community is slow and gradual unless it is caused by a violent imposition of values from an external dominating group. Traditional communities have

been the primary social manifestation of human evolution since the formation of tribal hunter and gatherer groups. Within them, humans developed relationships of mutual support in exchange for a sense of belonging, security, and well-being. But this kind of fealty did not bind others outside their community. In our current interconnected world, such orientations tend to be limiting. As Ruth Richards astutely points out, “our survival has become strongly dependent upon our commonalities as human beings, not on the differences between each other as individuals and as members of narrow reference groups” (Richards, 1993, p. 168).

**Surrogate Community (SC):** A closed, unstable system artificially created to attract and satisfy disenfranchised individuals yearning for community through imposed norms and values. Modern industrial societies have fragmented the traditional experiences of community for which human beings yearn. Surrogate communities are identified as an artificially designed means to satisfy the need for shared identity and a sense of belonging among individuals who would otherwise not have access to authentic forms of community. Surrogate communities are not authentic in the sense that individuals who join them must accept pre-established values, beliefs, and rules — as defined by others — under which the community operates. For instance, there exists an organization ostensibly dedicated to encourage community in the US and abroad. To do so, it sells community workshops — two day encounters among individuals interested in having a cathartic experience leading toward feelings of empathy and connectedness among each other. After the workshop is over, participants must continue to pay a substantial fee in order to “experience community” again, or else they will “lose community” and life will continue for them much as it did before the workshop.

**Learning Community (LC):** An open dynamic system in which individuals collectively learn to adapt *to* their environment. The “learning organization” is a case in point. In both organizational and educational contexts the notion of learning community has become a focus of attention in recent years (Senge, 1990; Caine & Caine, 1997). Individuals in learning communities have an explicit common purpose: to learn together. However, in some cases there is no difference between a learning community and a community of individual learners. Even when a learning community demonstrates creative and fluid processes of collaboration and synergy by which to adapt to its environment, it tends to do so in a reactive mode. Such

simple learning communities are often excellent means for learning about “doing things right,” that is, for increased efficiency and efficacy in a rapidly changing world. And as such, they are ideal spaces for exploring new ways of working, learning, and enjoying life in an integrated way. But they rarely incorporate an ethical futures perspective such as required for “doing the right things.” Such an ethical futures concern marks the quest for sustainability and for the sort of evolutionary possibilities explicitly espoused by ELC. In this sense, simple learning communities can be stepping stones toward evolutionary learning community.

**Evolutionary Learning Community (ELC):** An emergent (self-designing) learning system demonstrating dynamic stability by adapting *with* its environment and generating developmental pathways that are sustainable in the context of broader evolutionary flows. ELC is a human activity system that strives toward sustainable pathways for evolutionary development in synergistic interaction with its milieu. It does so through individual and collective processes of empowerment and learning how to learn and through an ongoing commitment to evolutionary learning (Laszlo & Laszlo, et. al., 1995). “ELCs do not adapt their environment to their needs, nor do they simply adapt to their environment. Rather, they adapt *with* their environment in a dynamic of mutually sustaining evolutionary co-creation.” (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998). ELC is not to be considered separate from the environment, but a part of it. Just as the concept “system” is more a pattern than a thing, ELC is best conceived as an ideal image of community that can serve as a beacon for the design of new social systems appropriate for a new evolutionary era. Just as the concept of “system” is more a pattern than a thing, ELC is more an ideal image of community than a particular social arrangement. Loye and Eisler (1987, p. 57) indicate the need for new visions of the future; a need for “a clearer sense of system goal states or prohuman images of the future.” ELC is an image that can serve as a beacon for conversations dedicated to forwarding a new culture of design appropriate to the challenges of life in a new evolutionary era.

#### **4 LEARNING CONVERSATIONS: LEARNING TO LEARN TOGETHER**

Peter Senge’s (1990) vision of the “learning organization” was first presented as an integral part of a systems approach to organizational

change in his bestseller, *The Fifth Discipline*. His idea of a learning organization as one which continually expands its capacity to create its future through increasing people's capacity to learn at all levels of the organization is most valuable, indeed. Nevertheless, ESD seeks goes beyond those ideas through it's focus on conversation dynamics.

Senge argues that organizations, as institutionalized human social systems, should adopt particular "disciplines" by which to ensure sustainable development. These disciplines are purported to provide the means by which the organization can learn how best to adapt to it's ever changing environment in ways that ensure it's continued operational development and financial growth. However, in a post-modern world of uncertainty and constantly increasing opportunity, a concern for organizational sustainability may not lead down the evolutionary pathways required by the interplay of individual, societal, and ecological demands for life on a small planet. What is needed is an approach to organizational design that emphasizes the joint learning curve of individual, organization, society, and ecology through mutually adaptive and sustainable orientations. To focus at any one level is to risk a false synchrony with the other levels, or else, to blindly adapt to the changes occurring at that level. Neither outcome provides the competencies needed to harmonize organizational learning with the dynamics of global change in any more than a passive way. A *learning how to learn* approach may provide the means to move beyond mere patch-work adaptive processes: it marks the first step toward making organizational design a conscious future creating process. ESD conversations address the need for, and the ways to, evolutionary management through organizational design based on *learning how to learn* orientations.

Historically speaking, humankind has more or less consciously pursued the strategy of adapting the environment to its needs in order to gain mastery over nature. We have adapted our environment to us, molding and modifying our surroundings however we please in order to be more comfortable. We also have seen fit to do whatever we like with the animals and plants that share our planet. By the dawn of the third millennium, this strategy of adapting the environment to us in accordance with our every whim has brought us to the threshold of

sustainability with the life support systems of planet Earth. However, there are alternatives.

Understandably, if a long period of human history has been marked by a certain type of behavior (in this case, adapting the environment to us), then when people finally decide they want change they often swing the pendulum of behavioral response to the other extreme (in this case, adapting ourselves to the environment). This is what many of today's more radical "green" movements advocate. Deep ecology, the basic philosophy in which they are grounded, is sound enough, but unfortunately, it is often taken to extremes by those who are reacting to the legacy of adapting the environment to us, saying we must now fully adapt ourselves to the environment. There must be an alternative to these two approaches. The first one makes us the villains of evolution by casting us in the role of planetary home wrecker. The second one makes us the martyrs of evolution by suggesting that we should safeguard Earth and all it holds by removing ourselves from the scene. If one strategy is adaptation of the environment to us, and the other is adaptation of ourselves to the environment, what's the alternative? Through a *learning how to learn* strategy of co-adaptation it is possible to engage in processes of adaptation *with* the environment.

When we seek to adapt ourselves *with* the way in which something else is evolving, we embark on a syntony quest. As we transit from one historical period to another, across the dividing line of a millennium, we are beginning to explore such ways of fitting our individual melodies together to create sustaining and enduring harmonies. This is more than just a nice metaphor: it is the essence of syntony. As with jazz musicians jamming in an improv. session, we have to learn certain skills, to develop and practice certain competencies, and to manifest a willingness to think and act interactively and responsibly. The notion of "will" — of active intention and passionate purpose — is crucial here. In fact, it is what makes the difference between merely *seeking harmony* and *engaging in a syntony quest*. And so are certain skills and competencies of evolutionary stewardship. The conversations of the new millennium need to be those that forward the attitudes, dispositions, values, and beliefs, as well as the skills and competencies required for such

stewardship. These are the culture building learning conversations of evolutionary systems design.

In organizational and educational settings, the notion of learning community has become a focus of attention in recent years. Corporations and educational institutions are recognizing the importance and value of the experience of authentic community within their operational contexts. Individuals in learning communities have an explicit common purpose: *learning together* in ongoing, flexible and self-organized ways for the attainment of common purposes. Nevertheless, learning together means different things for different people, just as learning *per se* holds different meanings in different contexts. In some cases there is no difference between a learning community and a group of students with a professor in a classroom setting. In other, more dynamic and innovative settings, a learning community is a group of individuals who come together to learn in a flexible and self-directed way.

Learning communities can potentially have a very creative and fluid dynamic of collaboration and synergy in order to better adapt to their environment, but they generally do so in a reactive mode. They create their own context and tend to partially or completely ignore the broader context in which they operate. This gives rise to a potential for of creating learning communities that do not question the basic assumptions of their purposes given their particular social and environmental contexts. Learning communities can be excellent means for doing things right, that is, for increased efficiency and efficacy in a rapidly changing world. For learning communities to foment also doing the right things implies an explicit ethical stance. This is where evoethics comes in as a distinguishing factor that sets evolutionary learning communities apart from learning communities, as such. In this sense, learning communities are like stepping stones toward evolutionary learning communities. Learning-oriented authentic communities are ideal spaces for exploring new ways of working, learning, and enjoying life in an integrated way. But they do not necessarily imply the ethical future-oriented perspective required for “doing the right things” which is at the heart of societal design conversations on ethical evolutionary sustainability. This is one of the particular contribution offered by ESD.

## **5 DESIGN CONVERSATIONS: THE CHALLENGE OF SHAPING OUR SOCIETIES**

Syntony is the means by which a sense of appropriateness is gained. The capacity to distinguish that which is appropriate from that which may not necessarily be so is a matter of discretion. Life in the natural world teems with examples of “goodness of fit” — between living system and milieu; life process and evolutionary dynamic; organismic form and organic function. These systems of syntony are manifest expressions of the natural syntony sense which all beings possess. However, this sense has atrophied to the point of vestigial capacity in human beings due largely to our ever increasing dependency on technologically mediated relations with our environment and our consequent distancing from nature and natural process. Study of grouping behavior among social animals (schooling among fish; flocking among birds; herding among ungulates) provides insight into systems of syntony in which the syntony sense is strong (A. Laszlo, 2001). Certain human societies also demonstrate strong syntonious capacity, although for the most part, they are nested in some form of aboriginal culture. A consideration of the different ways in which syntony is manifest in both the ecosystemic and societal settings permits a greater understanding of syntony as an organizing force in societal evolution. Such understanding may provide a basis for design conversations dedicated to discerning evolutionarily appropriate courses of action, both at the individual and at the collective/community levels.

Design conversations are strategic. They are motivated by a desire to actively participating in the shaping of our common future. Learning conversations are empowering because through them the community develops the consciousness, literacy and competencies required for designing conversations. Design conversations are self-empowering, because through them the community not only continues to develop their individual and collective capacities, but also are able to bring about changes that will approximate their visions of the future.

## 6 A NEW CULTURE

Evolutionary learning community can be seen as the vehicle for fostering the conditions that propitiate the emergence of a culture of design. However, when used in this way, the notion of ELC serves as a fuzzy guiding image of that which could and should be. As yet, it can provide a general though incomplete outline of an alternative way of being in the world. Therefore, any human activity system interested in becoming an ELC is faced with the challenge of translating this generic image into a concrete vision for themselves. In other words, through future creating design conversation, each community has to create an image of *themselves* as a concrete, authentic, and unique ELC.

ESD conversations of this sort combine evolutionary systems theory, social systems design methodology, and lifelong-learning orientations to individual and group empowerment. They are dedicated to the design of collaborative learning ecologies *with* others. Essentially, ESD conversations seek to create conditions that empower individuals and groups to develop the skills necessary for the co-creation of sustainable, evolutionary futures. Those who engage in such conversation dynamics and who employ the vehicle of ELC to do so see themselves as catalysts of purposeful and creative aligning/tuning with the evolutionary processes of which they are a part; finding and generating meaning and evolutionary opportunity, both individually and collectively. This process of searching together through ESD conversations is what we have been referring to as the syntony quest.

Erich Jantsch considers syntony as “inquiry at the evolutionary level par excellence” (1975, p. 103). He describes this inquiry as the process of cultural organization which “may be helped in an evolutionary sense by furthering cultural differentiation, a pluralism of as many ideas, life styles, and world views as possible. The invention and introduction of new forms of cultural organization ought to become increasingly a matter of conscious design” (Jantsch, 1975, p. 260).

According to Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary (1976), syntony can be defined as “in radio, resonance,” while ‘to syntonize’ is “to tune or harmonize with each other.” In this sense, syntony is the process of

communication and resonance at the psychic and spiritual levels which, in a subconscious way, has united parts of humankind over certain periods of time. In terms of evolutionary systems thinking, syntony connotes evolutionary consonance; the occurrence and persistence of an evolutionarily tuned dynamic regime. More loosely, it can be considered the embodiment and manifestation of conscious evolution; a purposeful creative aligning and tuning with the evolutionary flows of one's milieu. As the communities of future creating design conversations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is our challenge to learn to *consciously* tune in to the general evolutionary forces that shape us as we shape them. The syntony quest involves searching together for pathways of cultural differentiation and the purposeful transcendence of social systems through convergent evolutionary dynamics. As Jantsch puts it, "we shall have to learn now to design systems of syntony" (Jantsch, 1975, p. 270).

The creation of the conditions that foster the emergence of a new culture can be brought about through disciplined future creating design conversation. However, it takes more than just good intentions, for as famed systems thinker and economist Kenneth Boulding once said, "intentions are fairly easy to perceive, but often do not come about. Design is hard to perceive. But it is design and not intentions that creates the future" (in Banathy 1996, 71).

ESD conversation involves learning to think together about our values and to use the resulting understanding to co-create pathways for sustainable socio-ecological emergence. Design competence enables people to participate in the creation of a shared image of a sustainable and evolutionary future and to bring that image into being future creating conversation. The challenge is to engage with each other in generative and strategic dialogue on practical ways of living in harmony with nature; to search together for ways to live lightly, meaningfully, and simply in and with Earth, and to realize an extended sense of identity that embraces the world in enlightened self-interest. By learning to create systems of syntony it is possible to elicit such harmonious patterns of change — in ourselves, in others, and in our broader environment — purposefully, consciously, and yes — even intentionally.

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