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Some reflections on Pattern Laboratory

*The outer boundary of what we currently believe is feasible
is still far short of what we actually must do.*
-- Al Gore, Nobel Acceptance, December 10, 2007

Is the world getting better, or worse? A case can certainly be made for either position. Importantly, at this time, it does seem that the ground-breaking, mind-shifting work of creating a new, sustainable society is slower than the pace at which unsustainable practices are spreading.

Perhaps this can be changed. When we look at projects and programs for sustainable development, almost all seem to begin by re-inventing wheels. The world is full of data bases of 'good' and even 'best' practice, but they seem to have few practical uses. In other words, our projects and programs make very poor use of the experience and resources available to them.

From this observation came the development work from which the concepts of the Pattern Laboratory are emerging. It is an attempt to create a systematic approach to triple-loop learning: not only examining and appraising what we have learnt (double-loop learning) but also describing it in ways that make it accessible to others. It is time to learn not only from our own experience but also from that of others.

"In a constantly changing environment, sustainability is not some ultimate endpoint but … a continuous process of learning and adaptation. Designing for sustainability not only requires the re-design of our habits, lifestyles and practices, but also, the way we think about design. … The transition towards sustainability is about co-creating a human civilization that flourishes within the ecological limits of the planetary life support system."
– Daniel Wahl

Co-creation is a whole world away from 'improvements'
The enormous challenge of this work is that we need to find ways to leap-frog. It's not enough to learn to do the same things better – we need to learn in ways that help us leap to new insights, new solutions and new

effectiveness. *Every time.* A basic condition is the need to raise our awareness.

'Awareness' can be interpreted at many levels of human being. At every level, it can help us towards sustainable development. In the Pattern Laboratory we turn our attention to a specific kind of awareness: awareness of our patterns of *behaviour* and in particular our *mental patterns* that dictate our behaviour – in the absence of awareness.

One of the entry points we use is to identify recurring problems. A frequently occurring problem hints at underlying patterns.

For instance, 'We've informed everyone at least five times about the importance of sorting their garbage, but still they don't do it!' This can be related to a generic problem well-known to educators, 'They don't do as I say!' One equally well-known response to this is that in general pupils do what you *do*, not what you say – which indeed is a part of the pattern, though not the whole. This pattern has many facets, and seeing them described in a systematic way can help in finding or generating appropriate solutions.

A Pattern Library
Such systematic descriptions, collected for a given purpose (in our case, sustainable development), are collectively called a Pattern Library. A Pattern Laboratory is used to examine particular experiences from a pattern viewpoint, using existing descriptions as a base and contributing to the further development of the Pattern Library.

A general property ascribed to such a library is that it enables the generation of an infinite number of solutions to a given problematique.

A structured process
A Pattern Laboratory is a structured process, under development, by which patterns can be identified and new or improved descriptions created for the Pattern Library.

The general process is to identify problems or concerns, and then
- Ask questions in order to uncover underlying patterns; for instance 'Why is this a problem?', or 'Is this something we recognize from other situations?', or 'Do we find an existing pattern description that seems to match?' (the double loop by which learning is reinforced)
- Formulate 'a better way': how to avoid or solve the problems in the future; on this basis, review existing pattern descriptions and add or revise (the triple loop by which learnings can be made available to others)

Such a process, for example focused on a project or program, would normally be followed by the production of an evaluation report.

Existing pattern descriptions

Pattern descriptions are currently being collected and uploaded to a web site, as the nucleus for the envisaged Pattern Library.