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Planning for Real but Different Worlds¹

Many of our treasured ideas on planning derive from experience in changing peripheral aspects of systems under conditions of social stability. Under those conditions many things could be taken for granted and a high-minded air of rationality could be sustained. This is not so when central matters have to be changed under conditions of social instability.

Let us say that my concern is with the State of Lilliput. Lilliput is going to take over the schools in its territory; it is going to establish new kinds of junior colleges for a hitherto unrecognized minority group; it is going to have to negotiate new kinds of industrial relations with its teachers; it will take over the training of its own teachers; it will be considering new forms of examination controls over its students. All of this coming onto its plate at once constitutes a first-class headache. So what is done in Lilliput?

Let us look first at what is the most likely course of action. Lilliput draws together its own resources of experienced educators, promises them the support of other resources that can be leased, loaned or coopted, and charges them with looking at the whole problem with a view to recommending the best design for a new educational system. They are also expected to recommend how the new system will be brought into being, in what stages and at what expense.

Let us call this group the planners. There may at this point be some persons added to their ranks whose function is to represent various "client" interests (for example, teachers' associations and parents), but no one will doubt that the key contribution must come from the experts.

The first planning step that the group will take is to follow the wisdom of René Descartes and decompose the total problem into manageable parts. We can be fairly sure that most of the parts will still be so complex that they will each require a plan for a network of interrelated decisions to be implemented at different times. That is, the planning task cannot be made to disappear into a set of independent decisions to which certain decision rules could be applied. Planning remains more than just decision making. This the case even more so because the plans for the various part problems will need some degree of meshing together. No matter how the planners divide up their overall task, they will

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have to find some way of bringing it together again before resources are too heavily committed to implementation of the different parts.

The principles of decomposition may not be spelled out and may, in fact, reflect little more than the fortuitous array of expertise in the group. However, the notion of a “manageable problem” is very likely to include that

- It is so defined as to allow an existing body of vast experience and expertise to be brought to bear on it.
- It is a problem that is currently a focal issue in the local education setting and hence has to be managed—or at least appear to be.
- Its solution is likely to involve resources and social supports more closely tied to each other than to those that will be required to solve the other “manageable part problems.”

Thus, in this very first—and sensible—planning step we can see the building in of a blindness to what may be new and emergent. The essence of productive thinking lies in the ability to “recenter” a problem (Wertheimer, 1945) and yet decomposition to make the best use of existing resources is likely to center attention on what was relevant in the past. That past may be more relevant to the laurels of the chosen planners than to the future. Being guided by what are currently focal issues may not be much of an improvement. Current issues have their own history. A lot of water may go under the bridge from the time when certain insights are first made to when they seize the imagination of a significant public. Thus in the 1950s we were still busy designing health insurance services to solve the problems of the 1930s. Last, the way resources and social interests are tied together by their past may be a hindrance to coping with the future rather than a reasonable guide to how to look at the future.

Having redefined the overall problem as a set of manageable problems, our planners may adopt any of a number of procedures for handling them; for example, subcommittees, sequential treatment or review mechanisms. The mechanics need not concern us. What is of interest is that the planners know that they do not have limitless time to review and reconsider their plans in light of other plans being made and of changing circumstances. They have to choose courses of planning action that they believe—not know—will probably have the desired planning outcome. In this act of choosing, one can start to identify the style of the planners. It is the style of planning that I think we should start to worry about in planning educational innovation.

The choices that planners must make in carrying out their function are about how they will identify ends, select means, determine required resources and their allocation, design an operational plan for implementing the change and propose mechanisms for monitoring and controlling the implementation. It is in looking at these choices that I will try to identify the two main styles of planning that are to be found in the educational as in other fields. Following Ackoff (1970) I will refer to these as the “satisficing” and the “optimizing”

styles. In any planning group, one would expect both styles to be manifested, not only because planners sometimes live in different worlds from each other but because the problems themselves are sometimes more conducive to one style than another.

The "Satisficing" Style in Planning

In this style of planning it is typical to seek a statement of ends that will be as uncontroversial as possible and hence as little likely as possible to arouse dissatisfied parties to engage in their own counterplanning. In pursuit of these ends the planners will aim at going as far as is necessary to satisfy the major parties. Note that the planning context is seen as a political context and that there is no demand to do as well as possible, only to do well enough.

This style carries over to the selection of means. As the aim is to find only a satisfactory solution, not the best possible in the circumstances, the most practical way to proceed is to search first among existing courses of action—ones that have been tried and tested. Admittedly, the very novelty of the situation that has been brought into existence by the planning group will make it necessary to reconsider these known courses of action in the light of the new circumstances. It may even be necessary to give consideration to courses of action that were previously thought to be beyond the pale. But then this is presumably what the planning experts won their laurels for doing in previous such exercises. The overriding consideration in this search for suitable courses of action will be what is feasible. What courses of action are likely to yield a passable result and yet least arouse some people to thinking that they—as distinct from others—are being asked to pay too high a price for ends they otherwise agree to be desirable?

This approach inevitably creates a tendency to keep clear of central issues and focus on the marginal matters; to look for solutions in new procedures and practices rather than in organizational innovations; to suggest changes in the subject areas of sport and crafts rather than in the three Rs—no more than that. Since the most feasible changes will be those that are actually welcomed and supported by interested parties, rather than just accepted, attention will tend to be directed to correcting deficiencies in the past operation of the educational system. In these happy circumstances changes can be recommended even in areas of considerable centrality, thus conveying the impression that the planners have been going to the roots of the educational system—have been doing some really radical replanning. This is added icing on the cake for those who expect to be satisfied by the plan because they will undoubtedly have some problems, in a complex and changing setting, with getting all of their relevant publics to share their satisfaction. However, a preoccupation with correcting