

“Burning Man in the Default World? How Organizations Support Learning at Burning Man and a Democratic School”

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Burning Man in the World panel

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What could Burning Man's principles and practices look like in the default world?

- General interest in...
 - re-invigorating democracy, especially with low to moderate voter turn-out
 - encouraging emergent, decentralized organizing that integrates more voices, to address problems of topdown, centralized organizations and charismatic leaders (cf. popular books *Reinventing Organizations* and *emergent strategy* by adrienne maree brown)
- However, most people don't get hand-on experience with democratic practices and/or self-organizing
 - They mostly experience conventional bureaucracies, from birth to death: schools, universities, workplaces, voluntary associations, gov't agencies, etc.
 - Will have a difficult time with collectively organizing or engaging in democratic practices
 - If do try democratic practices (i.e., deliberation), they may be reluctant to do it a second time (Lee and Lingo 2011)
 - Or, with their experiences, they may start other groups, se Burning Man's and OCCUPY's off-shoots

Comparison of in-depth ethnographic studies of two learning communities

- This talk assumes some knowledge of Burning Man's organization (cf. Chen 2009, etc.)
- Use a comparative case with another creative learning community, a microschool located in NYC, to understand larger possibilities
 - Backdrop: NYC and other US cities emphasize school choice as “solution” for rectifying the “crisis” of “failing” schools
 - Learning community defined as a group that is dedicated to incorporating members' multiple interests and fostering learning, whether this learning is about one's self, community, skills and knowledge, etc.
 - Community for self-directed learning (more commonly referred to as self-directed education, SDE)

Practicing prefiguration: “The medium is the message”

- Iterative, routinized practices and relational work create the basis for “do-ocracy” culture where people have constant, communal moments to consider both group and individual interests.
 - Relational work are efforts that enable “community and connection” among persons
 - Simple as texting support or talking face-to-face, offering encouragement and recognition, doing activities together
 - Routines seem counter-intuitive to creativity and learning?
 - Typical understanding of routines portray them as rote, unmindful, and constraining
 - However, under certain conditions, routinized practices can both embed authority and encourage reflexivity within organizing structures.
 - Instead of continuously questioning authority or seeking out structures, members can build upon existing practices.
 - Members also have moments to reflect on existing practices and whether these should continue or change, depending on group and individual desires.

Research underway of an extreme case that touches 4 dimensions of everyday creativity and learning

Aspects that should be explored more	My on-going research on ALC-NYC
Organizations that are not devoted to creative industries per se; groups that are younger and emergent, perhaps even struggling with or directly challenging the status quo of conventional practices and outputs.	Microschool (28 students and 4 fulltime facilitators plus visiting facilitators) founded in 2008, rebooted several years ago by blending democratic and software management practices to support self-directed and collective learning
Everyday work done within these organizations and their fields that is typically undervalued or even stigmatized as “dirty” or low status, including carework, women’s work, etc.	Working with 1st-12 th grade students and families who are diverse along socioeconomic, ethnic and neuro-categories and past schooling experiences
Relational work, work that enables “community and connection” among persons, reminding us that creativity is not the property of any one individual person.	Organization emphasizes relationship with self and others – play, conflict-management, projects
Proto-institutional creativity, which includes coordination among organizations within fields to generate the start of new institutions (Chen 2012)	Organization encourages development of network of affiliates with support webinars, visits and exchanges, and yearly trainings

Comparability of 2 creative learning communities

Dimension	Burning Man organization (participant-observations, observations, interviews, archival: 1998-2001, follow-up)	Agile Learning Center, NYC (more than 80 observations/participant-observations, on- going)
Stakeholders	People who seek community/ different experience Various organizations (governmental, media, for-profit businesses, etc.)	Families and staff that are diverse in racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, sexual orientation/gender identification, neurotypical, and prior school experience People (including parents) who seek community/ different experience
Past experiences with prefigurative practices?	Limited to none	Limited to none Deschooling, especially for adults, to unlearn past organizing practices
Involvement	Voluntary	Voluntary (but schooling is compulsory)
Duration of involvement	Week – full year	School year plus optional summer “bonus week”

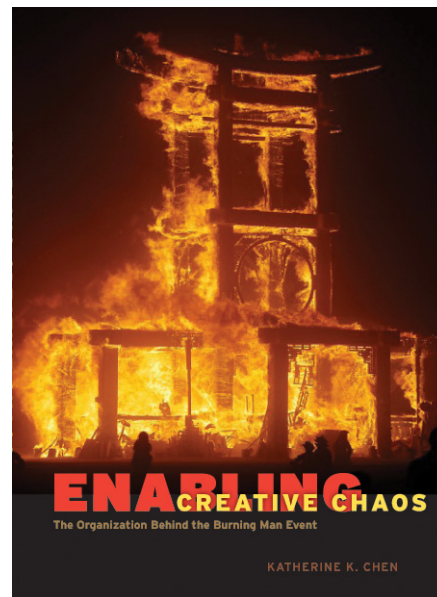
Dual lack of authority and “freedom is an endless meeting” challenges

- Researchers and practitioners have long noted how some collectivist-democratic organizations, particularly democratic schools, have struggled with both a lack of authority and structurelessness:
 - Teachers deployed their personal charisma by telling stories about themselves to motivate students; some students felt that teachers should exert more authority to create a learning environment (e.g., Swidler 1979).
 - In schools that conflated collectivist-democratic practices with the absence of structure, adults waited for students to take the lead in making decisions about what to learn, but they did not provide guidance or materials for exploration unless explicitly requested by students. At such schools, students did “nothing,” felt bored, and opined that they had not learned anything (e.g., Solo [1972] 1980; Gerard 2010).

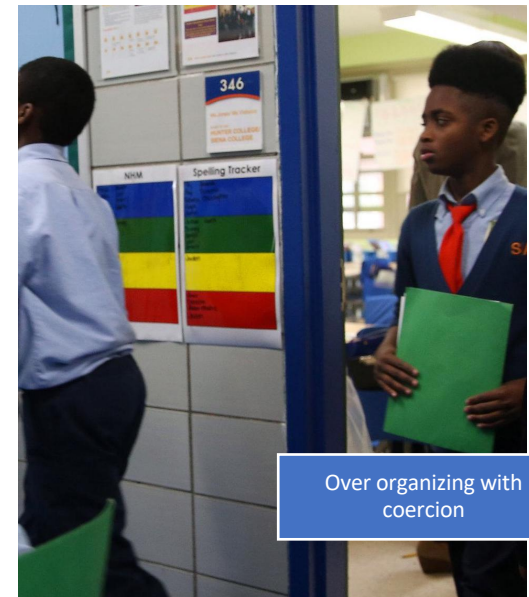
How to attend to both collective and individual interests without sacrificing either?



Under organizing



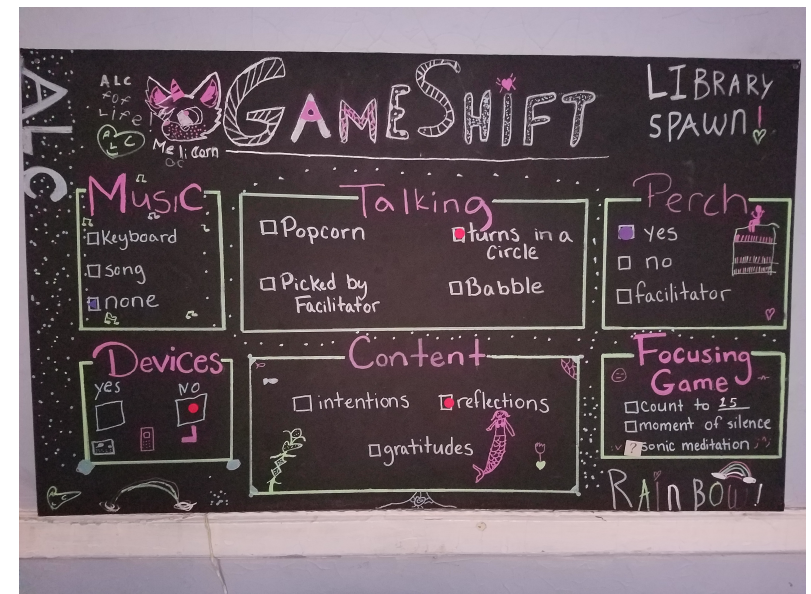
Enabling organizing
(Chen 2009)



Over organizing with coercion

Embedding authority in routinized practices

- Mandatory Mon. "set-the-week" meeting to familiarize members with recurrent and one-off collective activities
- Mandatory daily spawn/respawn meeting for setting daily intentions
 - Use kanban ("card signal") system for visualize moving through activities/projects
 - Intended to help with reflexive self-management of time and prioritization
- Mandatory Fri. meeting about "check-in" and optional "change-up"
 - Articulate awarenesses (without proposing solutions)
 - Propose, discuss, and refine agreements
 - Community agreements via community mastery board
- Visual signals for sharing feedback without interrupting verbal discussion
 - "twinkles," "change-up," etc.
 - Temperature checks
- Relations built through daily or regular interactions (conversations and joint activities) as enabling
 - "self-directed is a misnomer; we're always in relation to others" – June 20, 2016



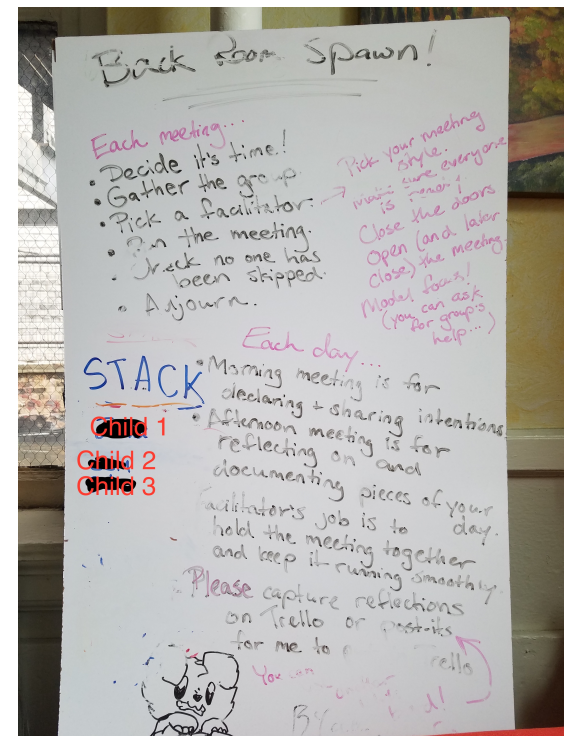
Stakeholders learn how to participate in and facilitate meetings and offerings

Younger participants interested in expedient meetings

Older students can facilitate parts of adults' meetings

Parents run own groups to discuss alternative learning and organizing

- some apply to family and work lives



Not all intentions result in visible creative outputs

[Images of artwork]

Undocumented outputs often involve
relational work

[Images of interactive play]

Example of relational work: What's best for the individual and group?

- Two students proposed replacing assigned spawns/respawns with special spawns to manage and get support on longterm projects.
- Facilitators countered that younger and less experienced students wouldn't learn as quickly how to work in spawns without modelling by more experienced students.
 - Students acknowledged importance of community learning.
- One of two students then proposed and generated an additional group for people wanting more support on deciding on and managing larger projects.

Longterm possibilities?

- "Children are people too": children learn to advocate for selves and interests, within a communal setting
 - Increasingly difficult to find opportunities for self- and collective-actualizing growth in conventional, topdown education and intensive parenting practices
- Through prefigurative practices, people may be better prepared to take on civic and other responsibilities.
 - Spread of solidarity economies and participatory practices in governance
 - Not the so-called "sharing economy" as envisioned by Silicon Valley
 - Participatory budgeting in NYC
 - Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi – "radical municipalism"