

OPTIMISM AND TRANSFORMATIVE DESIGN



Transformative Design, my class about design thinking that makes a real difference, run with Meghann (Dryer of IDEO) and Bernie (Roth of Stanford Engineering), opens again soon in the d.school.

I got thinking seriously about its themes this weekend at a fund-raising event organized by Castilleja School, where Helen teaches and Molly learns, on the theme of "Optimism" – engaging possibility. Optimism at the heart of social change.

Not inappropriate in these times.

Zainah Anwar shared with us her great effort to create a feminist caucus in Islam.

Jill Tarter gave us a cosmic perspective with thoughts about the possibility of extra-terrestrial life (an optimistic counter to "The Day the Earth Stood Still").

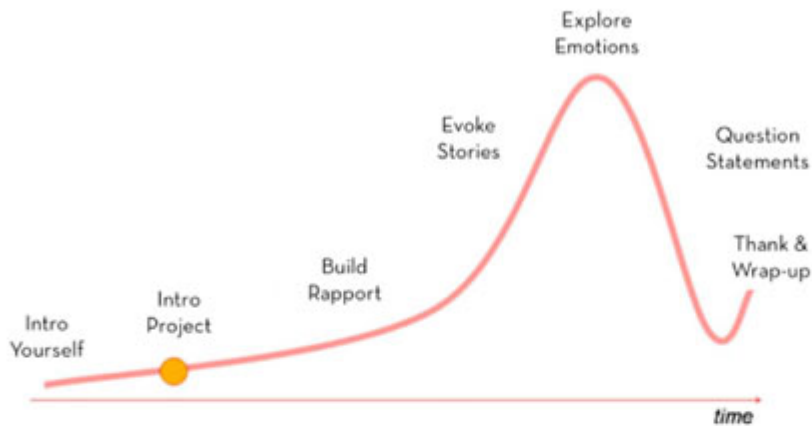
Cory Booker, Mayor of Newark, foregrounded listening in any address to social hardship. Classic anecdote – he visits a senior resident in a run-down housing project, wanting to offer help. She takes him out into the neighborhood and asks him to describe what he sees. Cory lists the problems, hardship, poverty, urban ruin, and, as he does, she grows more and more impatient with him, eventually saying he can do nothing for her. Why? Because, if that is what he sees in the neighborhood, that is what he will perpetuate. He needs to see the potential and possibility.

We heard Tim Brown (IDEO) on design thinking and the crucial importance of empathy, collaboration and risk taking, making mistakes – all key components of optimism.

Elizabeth Vargas, Anchor journalist with ABC News, did a fine job of interviewing.

METHOD

INTERVIEW FOR EMPATHY



WHY interview?

We want to understand a person's thoughts, emotions, and motivations, so that we can determine how to innovate for him or her. By understanding the choices that person makes and the behaviors that person engages in, we can identify their needs and design for those needs.

HOW to interview

Never say "usually" when asking a question. Instead, ask about a specific instance or occurrence, such as "tell me about the last time you ___"

Ask why. Even when you think you know the answer, ask people why they do or say things. The answers will sometimes surprise you. A conversation started from one question should go on as long as it needs to.

Encourage stories. Whether or not the stories people tell are true, they reveal how they think about the world. Ask questions that get people telling stories.

Look for inconsistencies. Sometimes what people say and what they do are different. These inconsistencies often hide interesting insights.

Listen to nonverbal cues. Be aware of body language and emotions.

Don't be afraid of silence. Interviewers often feel the need to ask another question when there is a pause. If you allow for silence, a person can reflect on what they've just said and may reveal something deeper.

Don't suggest answers to your questions. Even if they pause before answering, don't help them by suggesting an answer. This can unintentionally get people to say things that agree with your expectations.

Ask questions neutrally. "What do you think about this idea?" is a better question than "Don't you think this idea is great?" because the first question doesn't imply that there is a right answer.

Don't ask binary questions. Binary questions can be answered in a word; you want to host a conversation built upon stories.

Only ten words to a question. Your user will get lost inside long questions.

Only ask one question at a time, one person at a time. Resist the urge to ambush your user.

Make sure you're prepared to capture. Always interview in pairs. If this is possible, you should use a voice recorder—it is impossible to engage a user and take detailed notes at the same time.

Visual adapted from Michael Barry, Point Forward



Anna Deavere Smith wound up the inspiring evening with three of her monologues (she interviews and listens to people then acts out their words). They were about the way that struggle is at the heart of optimism – a mid-west rodeo rider's experiences of medical care (a flat rate of 1200 dollars to sort out the kidney the

steer kicked), a medic in a charity hospital abandoned by state and federal agencies in the wake of hurricane Katrina, a feisty feminist governor of Texas facing cancer.



This is extraordinary “documentary theater”. Anna is precisely the “representative”

– listening, respecting, conveying, authentically witnessing those whom she represents, in her own voice. It is a model of *political representation*

(Inspiring for the class – listen and witness in your design work, and also resonant for me, because my new book on the archaeological imagination has an extended discussion of eighteenth century debates about authenticity in the voice from the past.)