

Making Experimentalist Leadership practical: The theory and practice of futures literacy

Riel Miller

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The Problem

The primary purpose of schools is to prepare children for the future. So for schools to be so behind the times is not just an ancillary problem, it's a primary failing.

Max Ventilla, AltSchool Founder,
quoted in *Bloomberg Business*, June 10, 2015¹

Paradigmatic transformation, as anyone who has experienced it knows and as complexity theory explains, is not planned, it is emergent. This means it cannot be led in the conventional sense of planning change – which makes it somewhat unreasonable, not to mention stressful, to ask leaders to do the impossible. What then can leaders do when they try to take on the task of leading transformation? How can managers at the leading edge of change figure out whether the choices they are considering are about improvements, incremental or

not, to existing systems; or whether, instead, they might relate to novel, paradigmatically distinct systems? In other words: how can leaders distinguish systemic continuity from discontinuity when they analyse and act to make change?

This brief paper offers one practical response to this challenge. A response that integrates the findings of complexity theory and the results of extensive on-the-ground testing with a set of Futures Literacy design principles to propose an innovative Experimentalist Leadership (EL) model. My aim with this paper is to explain how to take advantage of both the dazzling profusion of impossible-to-anticipate experiments that surround us *and* our relentless efforts to use creativity to make improvements in the systems we already know.

EL is called ‘experimentalist’ because it is about enhancing the capacity of decision makers to take advantage of two fundamental forms of experimentation. One is the relatively familiar application of the scientific method, structured and intentional elaboration of situations where hypotheses can be tested, to understanding and changing known systems. The other uses the same scientific method of running experiments, but applies it to discovering and making sense of the previously unknown and unnamed. Put another way, Experimentalist Leadership enables decision makers to embrace two paradigms at once, as Mao Zedong called it: walking on two legs.

A working grasp of Experimentalist Leadership (EL) rests on understanding two related skills and a mindset (each elaborated briefly in the following sections).

The first skill involves improving the capacity to use the future. A better understanding of the nature and purpose of different anticipatory systems is important for EL, because it significantly enhances effectiveness and efficiency, when attempting to identify both systemic assumptions and the distinctive attributes of continuity and emergence in the present. Being able to distinguish different kinds of imaginary futures is like being able to add dye to the slide in a microscope, it helps to reveal the boundaries of what is being examined.

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The second skill is how to design collective intelligence knowledge creation processes. EL depends on being able to design and use methods that make sense of specificity or time/place unique information, because most emergent and novel phenomena are not initially (if ever) general, or even nameable, on the basis of existing historical models and variables. The tool here is what I have called the ‘microscope

of the 21st Century’, and the capacity to wield it is tantamount to adding one of the crowning glories of past social science, an ability to use statistics.

The third element is an Experimentalist mind set. If we accept the walking on two legs metaphor, this is a fairly natural stance or point of view. The trick is to enlarge our understanding of agency – how we make a difference – by integrating the attitudes and tools of two distinct but unitary perspectives: *doing* and *not doing*. *Doing* is agency understood as the familiar planning perspective that seeks to impose what we imagine about the future on the future. It seeks to colonise tomorrow – it aims for systemic continuity. *Not doing* takes agency in a different direction, not passivity, but patience and attentiveness that facilitates taking advantage of changes in the conditions of change. It seeks to nurture and grasp emergence as it happens – it aims to integrate the potential of systemic discontinuity. To offer another binary metaphor – this is a way to see the world using two eyes, shifting from a two-to-three dimensional take on the present.

Brought together, these three attributes of EL match the tenor of our times, so often described as a period of intense transformation calling for massive innovation. EL is well-suited to addressing the innovation imperative that currently inspires or haunts leaders in all sectors worldwide – since innovation, as anyone who does it knows, demands experimentation. Only inventing, justifying, and harvesting the fruits of experimentation are not easy tasks. Genuine innovation, as the literature amply demonstrates, not only breaks with the status quo but often disturbs it. Real innovations are untested propositions, which have little direct precedent and are fundamentally experimental in character, meaning innovations often fail. This does not sit comfortably with dominant administrative (hierarchical) decision-making systems, allergic to failure and largely defensive in their efforts to improve existing systems based on evidence that is of necessity from the past.

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About the Author

In 2012 Riel Miller took up an appointment as Head of Foresight for UNESCO in Paris. Prior to this for seven years he had worked as an independent consultant, at Xperidox Futures Consulting. For more than thirty years Riel Miller has been co-creating innovation, leadership and transformation in both the public and private sectors around the world, including thirteen years in total at the OECD in Paris (Directorates of Economics; Science and Technology; Education; Territorial Development; Development Centre; and the International Futures Programme). Riel Miller's previous publication for CSE was Seminar Series Paper 179, *If school's over, what's next? A scenario for learning in a Learning Intensive Society*, in November 2008.

About the Paper

What can leaders do when they try to take on the task of leading transformation? Riel Miller proposes innovative Experimentalist Leadership (EL) as one effective response. This model rests on two skills – improving ‘capacity to use the future’; and being able to design ‘collective intelligence knowledge creation processes’ – and an experimentalist mind set. He draws practical examples from the Global Education Leaders’ Partnership (GELP), a program which has set out to transform education, effectively and sustainably, at local, national and global levels. The author comments on evaluation of the program, whose members envisage education systems that equip every learner with the skills, expertise and knowledge to survive and thrive in the 21st century.

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