Lecture 4: Theories, Knowledge and Practice

Presentations

Reframing Group

As some of you may remember, we talked about downtown Framingham and the Brazilian community there. There was a downtown initiative that was developed by the city. It didn't include perspectives from the businesses, immigrant community, etc. We thought it was important to have other perspectives.

In terms of limitations – this is an ongoing process. First, the lack of resources in order to bring a new frame to fruition. Lack of funding from the city to develop this process, and lack of skill building and mentoring from the community. Another limitation was the lack of effective communication between the developers and the community was the language barrier. Also, there was an anti-immigrant sentiment – "yes, we want to work on this, but we have some issues with your culture and the way you live". Also, from the immigrant community, there was a lack of interest and involvement. Finally, apart from being a redevelopment project, there was no shift in power. The ones who designed the process were the ones who were still in power.

In terms of strengths, this created awareness of the different parts of the community. A monthly community meeting was established to discuss the redevelopment issue.

Usefulness of this method – we agreed that this method is always useful, but not always effective. We can see there are more limitations within the process than strength. It's more effective when benefits can be clearly seen and there are benefits for each party.

Sebastiao: I'd like to make some comments. This case is very interesting because the group begins to make a reframing effort, but the reframing is not completed yet. When we reframe a problem, we should be able to consider some of these questions [indicates the "Limitations" column on the chart]. The usefulness of reframing is to generate a new understanding of the problem, not necessarily to solve it. The problem depends on a lot of other things outside the reframing group.

For example, lack of effective communication. Reframing will not solve this problem, but will understand why it happens. After reframing, the groups will not be more participatory, but reframing will understand this. The reframing is not responsible for the resources to make this happen, but for a clear idea of what should be done.

It sounds like you're talking about reframing in a cognitive context. But it might also be useful in a political context.

We tackled the usefulness of reframing – when you reframe a certain conflict, since all situations have conflict and are so polarized – for example, mining issues and community resource management. The issue becomes not mining but to give a

space for speaking about managing resources, economic development. It widens how you see the problem. Like this one, the inclusion of community participation – you have to analyze how much power the community has or does not have. You need to build subsets of processes, not just go into the negotiation table immediately, because there has been no confidence building yet. The reframing points you toward what parts of the process needs to be considered.

Reframing doesn't change the world, just makes it possible to have an understanding of how to change. The actions do not depend just on the quality of my ideas, but on a lot of other factors. I should be careful in evaluating whether my reframing was well done. If I have not been able to understand many problems, the reframing should be useful for me to get clear ideas about how to solve it. Just ideas. For solving it, I need to take actions, and this depends on other factors. The reframing is previous to action.

It is clear, but I don't understand in this case, how would you actually do it? I understand what you are saying, but how do I do it in this case?

In every situation that you reframe, there is a common element you have to understand. Sometimes it can be key people, sometimes culture, sometimes language – without this it is hard to understand the whole picture and reframe. In this case, there are many elements. Even if you deal with the language, even if you deal with the legal issues, there is still a communication that needs to happen. There is an anti-immigrant group pressing against them. They weren't comfortable working in the community around them.

The limitations we should identify were things happening yesterday, inside this room, not things in the Brazilian community.

Also, it is difficult to reframe something in fifteen minutes. It requires going deeper into the assumed logic. We need to analyze assumptions behind the thinking, the relations among the assumptions. It requires a lot of effort and freedom, the decision to abandon one's ideas. If we arrive at the session of reframing absolutely sure of our ideas, we will not reframe anything. Reframing requires a lot of effort – this is a limitation.

Strengths – when we arrive at reframing, we are able to understand things we could not understand until five minutes ago. We may think it's impossible to solve this problem with the resources we have, then five minutes later, see what we can do with our resources. You didn't have enough time yesterday. Next week we will spend two days in reframing.

Design Group

We took an example from the Schon piece and then brought in our own experiences. It was about an architecture student who was trying to fit her design a building on a slope. Last semester I worked in the Media Lab on a project trying to redesign the motor scooter.

You have the client asking for the design, the experts doing the design, and the users who will use the scooter or cup or whatever. Generally this will result in some tangible product – or intangible, you could design a service, for example.

The design process is very context-specific. You're often given some specific task to do, for a specific audience. It's not like a scientific process where you do the same experiment anywhere in the world and it's the same, theoretically. Iteration – a lot of trial and error goes into the design process. There may be very specific objectives, or very vague objectives. The process is often to just throw ideas out there and then take to prototype as quickly as possible, take back to the drawing board and redo it…

Some of the limitations – you have all these different stakeholders, different objectives, different power. The people who actually use the product have very little power. On the market, post-production, users have power. Another limitation is having to physically prototype everything you're doing, that can get very expensive. Say you get to a functional prototype and then realize, say, no one wants an electric car in Indonesia, that your design objectives were wrong.

It might be useful if you can get a lot of people around a shared frame, with a shared objective. Although you can also start with a bunch of divergent opinions and pull out the bits that work together. But eventually you need some agreement and understanding. A lot of times design means you're throwing out ideas that are really cool, but don't necessarily fit into the context of what is needed.

Unlike the scientific method, it's non-replicable. The second time around, it's a completely different process. It's totally subjective, it's just an organic, creative process.

Sebastiao: Our starting point was the book The Reflective Practitioner. It presents design as a dialogue with the situation. What is clear after your exercise is that design is not just a dialogue with the situation, it also requires dialogue with the stakeholders.

I enjoyed being there because I was trying to abstract these to services, not just products, and applying these concepts back to community development.

SECI Cycle Group

We talked about the spiral of the cycle yesterday. Using the cycle, going from tacit to explicit and back to tacit, the example we decided to use was learning a language. We had a very good working group for this – Jody spent a lot of her professional career teaching Spanish, Musa is bilingual in Turkish and English and now his son is learning English in a very different way, I spent awhile working with students with Asperger's.

Moving from the tacit absorption of knowledge, to a more explicit teaching – you go to school, someone corrects you. When you get more formal instruction, it expands how you think about your language, both in spoken and written form. And the purposeful expansion of language, when you learn larger words, synonyms… And then you have the combining of these things, where your individual language base is formalized.

The spiral never stops, and is continually regenerating itself. The capacity to apply this method is very natural – it's a very fluid way of absorbing material. The limitations were often the opportunities for practice, like lack of exposure to formal

education. Jody pointed out that one of the limitations is the mindset of the person learning.

If you were teaching someone who had deficits through their experiences or neurology, you'd have to use the other practices – reframing, and a very different design of service delivery.

How does this move power around? My thoughts – when you give someone a basic set of skills, like teaching someone how to read, you have given them power that you'll never be able to control again. You have to trust them to go and learn. Even in dubious circumstances, people are trusted enough that it's considered valuable to give that to someone else.

It's interesting that what she was expressing at the end was about control. It's like when we were talking about design – it's organic, going to generate something new for everyone. What I learn is not necessarily what you want to teach me.

I think that's true in all the examples. The minute you think, this is the problem and I understand it, then someone says, what about looking at it this way? It's like that in design, when you sit down with other people and everyone is throwing ideas around. You never know where it's going to go, where your knowledge base will end up.

The way mainstream society defines education, it is a formal school. It can be a kind of power control. When we define expansion of knowledge as formal education, I think that's dangerous. How do you preserve a culture, but how do people interact with mainstream society? This is from my background working with indigenous communities. How does it work in America? Like when black Americans appropriate the education of white Americans? Is that annihilating a whole cultural identity?

Participant Exercise

You have been given a concrete problem. Each person has five minutes to individually conceive of a solution. Then we will form groups, and each group will decide on one solution.

The main information is the graphic. You don't need to consider the other components in the text.

In groups: find a common definition of the problem, and strategies for tackling the problem.

[individual and group work]

Group 1

We agreed that there was an overall problem of lack of data. Given that we had fifteen minutes and one sheet of paper to solve the world's problems, we thought that if we made a couple of hypotheses about what the problem might be, then we would know what kind of data we needed to collect. And we thought about what we might do with the data.

One hypothesis was that clearly there was race disparity, but we don't know why. Maybe more white people are committing crimes, but they're not being caught, or prosecuted. The second hypothesis was maybe it's socioeconomic, not a racial issue at all. Those have very different solutions – the second is more of a back-end.

Sebastiao: Does anyone want to make questions to them?

Why is the paucity of data problematic?

I thought the paucity of data was problematic because it only provided extremely narrow pieces of information with which to view a much broader problem. Part of it is looking at it from an economic standpoint. In order to form a better definition of the problem, we would have needed additional piece of information.

Those pieces being, why do we have a 70/30 split, what are the socioeconomic backgrounds, age, gender, is this a suburb or inner city...

And how many are you looking at? Is it 100 white kids who are committing crimes, or 100,000 African-American kids going through the court system?

Also, this was a one-year photograph of the numbers. Is it getting better or worse?

Sebastiao: We are talking about the conditions for the problem, but we need to go forward and talk about the problem, and its solutions. The problem you have had, trying to solve this problem, is different from the other groups. All the groups have the same problem of having incomplete information. Frequently in society we have this problem and need to construct assumptions.

The problem for us was that this was an inequitable justice system, not necessarily a social issue.

Sebastiao: We got one assumption – the exercise is working. Why did you think it was a socioeconomic issue, not a racial one?

Well, this was one of our hypotheses. We have no data to substantiate this claim.

We all frame hypotheses based on our experience. It's not only the information which is presented here, but our background and experiences. I don't think there's anyone in the room who didn't have a hypothesis, based on our experience.

Claudia: Now we have two opposite hypotheses. The exercise might work better if we just picked one.

Maybe the police are catching more black criminals and letting off more white criminals. Maybe the court system is acting more harshly toward African-Americans.

There's also a stagnancy in the justice systems. As juveniles they have certain rights and are processed very differently, so things take longer, and meanwhile the kid just languishes.

Sebastiao: You are aware about some hypotheses. The effort should be to go a bit further – is it a question of discrimination in the prosecution? Do you have reasons

to think this would be the case? I need the concrete name for the situation, not the general name. He should be able to explain why he thinks the justice system is prosecuting more black people. Why do you think that?

I don't necessarily think that, I just think it's a possibility.

At the moment I hypothesize something, I start to believe it is true.

So I think we've started to explain it: police are more attentive to black crime than white crime.

Our participation is not to try to understand what they're trying to say, but to bombard them with a lot of questions.

What's your model about how race affects the justice system? What's the mechanism for how that works? What is it about race that makes the justice system catch or prosecute an African-American youth different than a white youth?

Part of the hypothesis, from my experience, is that the white kids who get caught don't enter the system.

Now we have more clarity about this idea.

Group 2

We turned the problem on its head, maybe reframed it, based on our background. Why is juvenile delinquency looked at as a problem of race? What is going on with our youth in general, why do they need to turn to drugs and crime? Our solution is to take a step back and look at how we can prevent them from entering the system in the first place. Providing opportunities for these youth, whether education or skill building. That was how we reframed it, how can we be effective before they enter the system.

Why do you think it is more effective to act before they enter the system? That is your assumption.

Well, because you're preventing the situation before it happens.

Why do you think it's possible to prevent the situation?

I think it's a matter of trying to put a band-aid on something once the cut's already there. I believe if you can provide people with opportunities, better alternatives, if you can support youth and help them see a tangible vision, it can be possible, whether from school or family or community support.

We need to move at two levels at the same time – the level of the situation, and the level of the cognitive problem.

Why do you presume that the only way that youth has a voice is through time?

I'm sorry, we didn't explain that very much. We thought youth should be a part of the process of forming solutions, not just police and judges and other adults.

In response to why we think it can be prevented, the assumption would be that it's a choice, and if it is a choice, it's preventable. They have to have the opportunity to make the choice.

Behind all this: what is race? Why do we speak about it so much? Is it just the color of skin or something else?

We do know that people make presumptions based on very external perceptions. Those categories realistically exist, socially, both in the minds of the sociologists and the minds of those who are committing the crimes. So it doesn't make sense to say there really isn't this category of race, because there is.

Yes, even if it doesn't make sense for you, you need to acknowledge that these categories exist for other people.

Sebastiao: We changed the level of our discussion.

My follow up question was, why do you assume it's not about race?

Currently our frame is that this is a race thing. The bigger picture is we have youth who are committing crimes, and we need to find solutions for them, whether they are black or white.

Sebastiao: Don't focus only on the problem itself, but also the reasoning about the problem.

In your statement about needing more opportunities for youth, why do you assume youth don't currently have opportunities?

Well, clearly they're choosing crime and drugs, so their opportunities must not be very good.

What if I say, I believe they already have opportunities? Why are they choosing crime? You're assuming that people will take the better choice.

I guess I don't understand the connection between opportunities and youth crime. You're assuming that creating opportunities will cause youth to commit less crime.

Group 3

African-Americans tend to have lower economic status, due to a variety of reasons, and we believe this leads to higher crime. Our proposal is to have an education program, and see if crime rates decrease.

Why is this a good assumption?

For me, this is based on real, on the ground experience.

So you're saying that youth don't feel empowered, so they're angry? Or they don't have enough money to do the things they want to do?

They don't have access to the education they need to get a good job, or there aren't even jobs available. So crime is a way to get these things – sneakers, say – faster. But sometimes it's just basic needs.

But what if you have people who are buying fancy cars on credit, or they stole the car?

But on the other hand you have people who are just trying to get money to buy the Wonder bread. While we popularize the notion of having the bling, you also have those who just don't have anything, so they're engaged in criminal activity just to get basic needs.

So you're saying if they had all their material needs fulfilled, they wouldn't commit any crime?

I'm not saying that, but the vast majority of crime is related to needs not being met.

So the assumption is that the solution you proposed will reduce that segment of crimes, committed for economic reasons, not necessarily other crimes.

Yes, that's one part of it.

Seeing the values of the community instead of the problems – is the problem within the African-American community, how they see themselves?

No, I don't think so.

Sebastiao: My evaluation was that the exercise worked, though it was not easy for us. Tomorrow we will have a brief conversation about this. To maintain the mind at the cognitive level – not necessarily to move forward in the situation itself, but see what is going on in the mind of the other person.