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Takemusu Aiki: Insights into Optimizing Ideational Flow

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper will investigate how designers can connect broader understandings of 'leadership' with specific design knowledge to enhance creative performance. The emphasis is on how designers can potentially 'manage' their thinking within the ideation process – maximise “ways” to spread 'memes'. A meme is a rule, concept, or idea that can be spread from one person to another. Designers have been described as 'memetic engineers' (Dawkins, 1989) because they produce memes or units of cultural information that are recycled and evolve over time. Memes emerge through 'imitation and recombination' according to Blackmore (1999), by mixing up ideas to produce new combinations. One approach to understanding and reflecting on existing disciplinary experiences, as well as challenging creative potential, is through researching other conative “ways” – such as 'Aikido' – to embrace and reflect on 'how' we think instead of purely 'what' we think.

Regarded as one of the most difficult and effective of the martial arts, Aikido is derived from adapting and blending ancient Japanese martial arts like Jujitsu, Karate and sword fighting with breathing and meditation studies. For Strozzi-Heckler (2007a), “Aikido is more than just learning a set of techniques. It's a way of life. It's a way of thinking about things” (p. 117). Aikido offers a powerful 'sphere of influence' to reveal greater possibilities for the mind and body – a holistic 'way' of integration, harmony and coordination – a language with its own rules and broad grammar (Saotome, 1989). Like any language, the elements of the 'Aiki Way' have an infinite variety of creative applications and great elasticity of structure based on training and refining

one's mind and body to such an extent that perception, evaluation-decision, and reaction become almost simultaneous – the power 'to be able' or to become 'other-wise'.

In order to understand the transformative opportunities of Aikido I began training in Aikido Shinryukan. Since 2007 this research has used ethno-autobiographic methods to collect data on the culture, customs and practices of people who train regularly in Aikido at a local dojo in order to identify the traditions, specific patterns of behaviour, use of language, and symbols. This paper explores the conceptual possibilities of applying Aikido theories beyond the conventional 'dojo' setting – referred to as "Takemusu Aiki" or "Courageous and Creative Living" (Saotome, 1993; Ueshiba, 1984; M. Ueshiba, 2002) – and provides provisional and partial insights on how the skills and pedagogical methods of Aikido could connect with the experience of ideational flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) to elevate the ordinary to the optimal. This research investigates to what extent design leadership based in Aikido can transform co-creative flow?

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2.0 CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

Today's knowledge economy presents both enormous challenges and opportunities for design transcendent of any geographic context, isolated discipline, or optimised concept. Beyond traditional skills and vocational knowledge (Friedman, 2000b; Mok, 2002; NextDesign Leadership Institute, 2005) future trajectories for designers require creative leadership in the search for the 'new'. Conceptual approaches must blend broader understandings with specific design knowledge in distributed problem solving and team-based multi-disciplinary practice. Creativity is not static – like Aikido it is a dynamic process. For Emery (2002, p. 20), "designing is not a linear, sequential process where it's easy to begin at the beginning and proceed logically to a resolved outcome. Rather, designing is a dynamic, flowing, connected, iterative, overlapping, synchronous, erratic, unpredictable, disruptive, revelatory continuum". Creativity is a product of the cross-pollination of many factors, including personal characteristics, social, cultural, and environmental influences (Sternberg, 1999). With design-based thinking increasingly located in between dimensions and disciplines, new thinking and ways of practicing are required by designers to stay relevant in a post-disciplinary future. This paper explores 'ways' of connecting creative leadership in 'Western' terms – as a product-orientated, ideas-based phenomenon (Mayer, 1999) – with an 'Eastern' view of creativity, which Pope (2005) describes as the expression of an inner essence "through 'being' or 'becoming' rather than 'doing' or 'making'" (p. 60).

Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, developed the art not only as a creative mind-body discipline and practical means of handling aggression, but with the belief that the arts, principles and skills could transfer to any of the challenges we face in life – from personal relations to the business environment. Aikido training represents a unique opportunity to conceptually explore

how this theory could influence shortcomings in the problem solving process. According to Basadur (2004), when individuals are presented with new ideas they are often critical too early, shutting down the flow of productive thinking.

Groups often jump into solving the problem without first considering how they will go about solving it and then flounder. They are unaware of the concept of process (how) and focus only on content (what). Meetings can be undisciplined discussions where facts, ideas, points of view, evaluations, action steps, and new problems are interjected randomly. (p. 110)

The dynamic tension between chaos and order so often involved in problem solving suits a multidisciplinary mind that can view problems from a variety of angles. O'Neil (1997) views Takemusu Aiki as a type of 'kinetic leadership' and calls for Aikidoka, and leaders more broadly, to "think of themselves, in a sense, as artists of perpetual movement, ever prepared and poised for new challenges and opportunities coming from any direction" (p. 38). Research by Socha (2004) maintained that "because Aikido is all about relationships, it provides a metaphor that is useful in many human domains. To work with other humans is to have relationships" (p. 3). This metaphor also describes how a designer experiments with memes – the process of ideation itself correlates to the practice of Aikido.

3.0 DESIGN FOR ADAPTING

3.1 Aikido

Historically, the Asian martial arts have cultivated ideas of self-knowledge, self-improvement, and self-control – a 'way of being' in the world. Over the past twenty years (Levine, 2003), an increasing number of Aikidoka have been creatively extending Aikido practice outside the conventional dojo setting influencing fields such as education, psychology, health, business, sports, music and the military. Aikido differs from other martial arts for Westbrook and Ratti (1970) in its essential motivations and intentions as it is an art of self-defense – there is no attack – and there is a constant reference to the inner energy, the inner strength or *ki* as the particular form of energy to be employed. In addition, Aikido's characteristic strategy is embodied in the form of entering and blending movements that are always circular, with the Aikidoka at the center point of a 'dynamic sphere' of interactions occurring around the periphery.

Aikido's versatility offers a creative answer to any kind of attack, and involves learning experientially with and through the body. Aikido cannot be practiced conceptually. For Pettman (1992), "unless you do Aikido movements you can't actually know how they feel and what they ultimately mean" (p. 3). The embodied knowledge is learnt through recurrent practices – within a context of action – that transcends words and language. Aikido is viewed as a 'generative practice' (Strozzi-Heckler, 2007b) as it "is a conscious choice to embody a behaviour that can be used in whatever situation we find ourselves. It's a commitment to a way of being in the world. It is life affirming, creative, and it produces a reality by how we orient to our life situation" (p. 83). As McMahon (2005) observed, for Ueshiba "the secret of Aikido is not in how you move your feet; it is how you move your mind" (p. 90) and this involves "exploring ourselves, how we move through the world and how we interact with others" (p. 86).

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This perspective is reinforced by research (Crum, 1987; O'Neil, 1997) on business leaders, finding strong patterns and correlations between their attitudes, actions, thoughts and practices, and the principles and values of Aikido. Conversely, success in the martial art of Aikido has been used as a model to re-conceptualise traditional management and leadership strategies (Pino, 1999). One must be able to adapt quickly and flexibly to a changing business environment with consistency between words and actions. For Strozzi-Heckler (2007b) “the embodied self is the primary source of power for a leader, and it can be trained through practices” (p. 21) such as Aikido, and then translated into a leadership presence.

3.2 Design

Both designers and Aikidoka refine through practice – the awareness comes in the ‘doing’. In Aikido this process is conveyed by the Japanese word “keiko” which means “to train, to practice, to learn, or to engage in” (Lowry, 1995, p. 23). This ‘disciplined attention’ is gained in the dojo environment, which Strozzi-Heckler (2007b), describes as “a space of commitment in which people engage in a collective practice for learning and transformation” (p. 46).

Human beings shift knowledge from one frame to another. As they do. They embrace knowledge, enlarging it, internalising it, transmitting it, sifting it, giving it new context and transforming it. (Friedman, 2000b, p. 8)

This paper examines the practice of Aikido as a kind of nonverbal text that enables Aikidoka to connect insights about what they learn with their bodies to concepts and ideas in design – ‘disciplines as Ways to connect conversations’ (Levine, 2006) – to guide the creative leadership of others. Design is all about leadership, according to Nelson & Stolterman (2003), because the “process of design is always the most effective and efficient means of getting organizations and individuals to new places” (p. 4). The Aiki Way is a useful ‘adaptive transformation process’ (Bruder & VanPatter, 2006), which explores the conative (not simply cognitive) extent to which designers are likely to realize their potential and develop better intuition.

Recent criticisms (Mok, 2003; VanPatter & Aagaard, 2005) that *design* needs to explore broader cross-disciplinary skills, tools, processes and behaviours to adapt and stay relevant in a changing marketplace also shift the creative focus to *designing* instead of purely design. In Mok’s opinion “the fundamental model of design consulting practice has lost its relevance and become another revenue-focused exercise in consumption” (n.p). VanPatter (2005) refers to this traditional model as ‘Design 1.0’ and involves designers working within framed or semi-

framed challenges focused on product creation. Future trajectories for design consultancies need to anticipate a more strategic cross-disciplinary space – “one that many disciplines participate in, not just designers. Among other things, this means that it has to be more than a product design process” (p. 8). This co-creative context means designers need to rethink old approaches and learn new process skills.

3.3 Design leadership

VanPatter refers to this emergent operating space as ‘Design 3.0’, and suggests that new models of design leadership are required in this space for designers to move from being critical thinkers to the ‘enablers of innovation dynamics’. ‘Complexity Leadership Theory’ is a useful new way of reconceptualising design leadership based on the following core proposition: “*Much of leadership thinking has failed to recognize that leadership is not merely the influential act of an individual or individuals but rather is embedded in a complex interplay of numerous interacting forces*” (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007, p. 302). This perspective distinguishes between design *leadership* and design *leaders*. The theory views *leaders* as individuals who act in ways that influence the dynamic processes and the flow of knowledge and creativity involved in *leadership*.

A creative leader induces others to focus the process and process skills on meeting their challenges. They become consultants or facilitators in the process of solving the challenge rather than giving orders or doing the work themselves.

(Basadur, 2004, p. 111)

3.3 Creative flow

One implication for designers of ‘Design 3.0’ is that they will need new process leadership skills in order to collaborate with others in the creative process – a reevaluation of Nelson & Stolterman’s concept of ‘design intention’ (2003) which means a *process of giving direction*. The paper also follows the research of Pope (2005) on the co-operative view of creativity which he defines “as *working and playing with and with respect to others*” (p. 65). This approach advocates a shared process through exchange, action in relation to other people, recognition of differences (including disagreement), interaction both face to face and at a distance, as well as the notion of ‘response-ability’. The challenge for designers is to locate ‘more creative’ ways of being creative (Greene, 2004) – to ‘become otherwise’ in a potential transdisciplinary circulation of concepts and opportunities for creative cross-pollination – a ‘creativity intersection’ (Collins & Amabile, 1999). This occurs where an individual’s domain-relevant skills, strongest intrinsic interests, and creative-thinking processes overlap.

De Bono (1992) believes that creativity is a skill that can be taught and that designers can restrict their creative potential by not exploring ‘more lateral’ ways of getting new ideas and new concepts. He proposes a number of lateral thinking techniques and tools that can be used to change concepts and perceptions – systematically optimising creativity to find new concepts and ideas. The advantage of de Bono’s approach is that it provides designers with tools to fight the instinct of criticising new memes – one of the essential elements of any successful ideation session. In contrast, Nickerson (1999) takes the position that desire, internal motivation, and commitment are more important in the creative process than any specific tool or technique in enhancing creativity. Amabile’s (1999) concept of ‘motivational synergy’ suggests creative performance “is likely to be optimised if intrinsic motivation is most salient at those stages of the

creative process where novel thinking is most crucial – the problem identification stage and the idea generation stage” (p. 306).

Psychologists who study intrinsic motivation have also found Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) concept of 'flow' useful. The ideation process often involves experiencing a state of consciousness where an individual becomes totally absorbed in what they are doing – a focused 'flow' (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) – a harmonious mind and body experience that elevates the ordinary to the optimal. For Pope (2005), “being fully and creatively co-operative has little to do with 'stealing the show' as it does with 'going with the flow'” (p. 66). Csikszentmihalyi (1991) highlights Eastern martial arts (such as Aikido) as a specific form of flow, but this perception can be problematic according to Strozzi-Heckler:

“Aikido is a strikingly beautiful art, but to think of it only in terms of flowing and blending would be to slander it. The practice of aikido demands that we live in contradiction and paradox: answers and solutions are guided by what is presented in the moment, not by fixed predispositions. This spontaneity of spirit makes it threatening for institutions and rigid minds.” (2007a, p. 73)

Basadur (2004) states “that leadership has less to do with matching the “right” traits or behaviors to the “right” situation and more to do with how leaders involve others in thinking together in innovative ways” (p. 103). Designers must understand the flow of the design process and what behaviors and attitudes are useable for encouraging it. A response will require new words, new ideas, new possibilities – a 'common language' to facilitate the efficient communication of memes.

4.0 NEW ANGLES AND PERSPECTIVES

Initial auto-ethnographic studies training in Aikido Shinryukan revolve around the conceptual possibilities of Aikido's 'sphericity', 'geometry', and 'jiyu-waza'. Findings show that the dojo is an ideal 'learning laboratory' – a collaborative social system where Aikidoka practice with various kinds of people and there is no rivalry because no one wins or loses. On the training mat Aikidoka must discover Aikido within themselves by studying what works, how and why it works, and what doesn't work. There are many conceptual similarities between the creative thinking process and the basic principals and practices of Aikido. In creative thinking, Aikido knowledge translates into performance through 'movement practices' involving circular 'blending' and 'entering' movements.

2007 Gasshuku – creativity in action: Toshiharu Sawada Shihan and Nobuo Takase Shihan in Auckland. Photography by Colin Pearson, Grove House.



Any meaningful conversation or interaction consists of a series of blending and entering moves [...] Entries inform your partner about what is important in this relationship. The entries are the material, the ideas, the facts for co-design, while the blending is the act of co-creation. The goal in aikido, and in collaboration, is to spend the majority of time blending. (Socha, 2004, p. 2)

De Bono's technique of 'movement' (1992) also encourages people to move forward from one idea to another as part of a creative process. Rather than a designer stopping to judge whether something is right or wrong, using 'movement', they seek to move forward interested only in where they can *move* to from the idea. Without movement skills, de Bono believes it is almost impossible to be creative. Aikidoka use the concept of 'moving the self' (Seiser, 2005) – focusing on your own movement – as opposed to engaging in a competitive struggle with your challenger. The principle of "Sphericity" (Westbrook & Ratti, 1970) and associated movements such as 'Hipparu' – meaning to pull, to draw, or to stretch with the energy of your challengers – synchronise perfectly. In the case of ideation – to transform co-creative flow:

If you combine all those basic circuits and all the possible spirals and semi-spirals of neutralization around your Centre into a single image, the result is a sphere: a "Dynamic Sphere" of circuits enveloping you protectively as you channel any aggressive action into any one or combination of those circles according to the circumstances of each attack. (p. 100)

Designers begin with situations of uncertainty and possibility. Aikido's 'geometry' (Dobson & Miller, 1993) – 'the three fundamentals' of triangular entry; circular blending; square control – could be used as a process language in shaping how designers search for the new and optimise 'ways' through the dynamic interaction so often involved in creative thinking. "Leadership, however it is defined, only exists in, and is a function of, interaction" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 302). For Strozzi-Heckler (2003), "embodying the ability to work effectively with people becomes an essential leadership competency" (p. 245). Aikido's strengths are centered on relationships, collaboration and conflict resolution and incorporate the freedom to make adaptations, improvise and 'make things up'. Aikido is immediate, and responsive, allowing designers to move appropriately in a creative thinking context.

The dynamic tension between chaos and order often involved in the co-creative process – described by Hock as 'chaordis' (as cited in Waldrop, 1996) – suits a multidisciplinary mind which can view problems from a variety of angles. The integrative Aikido practice of 'jiyu-waza' is a useful metaphor when it comes to understanding real life situations and strategising intentional interventions in situations of chaos and order: The term literally means 'chaos taking,' and facilitates the Aikidoka being in the right place, with the right technique, at the right time, with the right level of power. For Strozzi-Heckler:

I realised that this is what the many individuals and teams that I worked with were going through in their personal and professional lives. In other words, they were required to deal with multiple concerns, one thing coming right after another throughout their day. Of course the concerns weren't people physically trying to attack them, but they were verbal attacks, requests, assessments, disagreements, faxes, breakdowns in communications, conflicts, phone calls, and so on. (2007b, p. 68)

There are no limits to the ways in which we can be attacked, or ways in which we can respond. Jiyu-waza is a form of dynamic practice in which a designated Aikidoka defends – spinning in circular, fluid movements – against multiple attackers in quick succession without knowing how they will attack, in what order, or from which angle (front, side, or rear). Research into this technique suggests a model of coordination similar to Dawkins' description of the evolution of memes, especially "their propagation by jumping from brain to brain" (as cited in Blackmore, 1999, p. 6). You have to be fluid, stay focused and be inventive. Ueshiba (2002) described this state as 'stillness in movement,' involving constant reassessment of one's situation and priorities by blending with, and maintaining control of the interactions of the challenger's own energy and actions to generate strategies to engage them. Saposnek (1980) develops this concept further, describing how in jiyu-waza Aikidoka become "like a spinning top, exquisitely maintaining its balance and by this motion spinning off or drawing in everything it touches" (p. 80).

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

This PhD 'research through design' project weaves together two 'frames of reference' in order to develop a systematic methodology for thinking about 'co-creative movement' as a specific form of flow. Aikido integrates mind-body learning and new kinds of experiences (Levine, 1991) for reflecting on how we think and act as design leaders in an ever-changing design environment. Aikido's 'sphericity', 'geometry', and 'jiyu-waza' echo the continuous, circular flow of the creative process, although for Friedman (2000a) designers are "neither the entry-point nor pivot of the design process. Each designer is the psychological centre of his own perceptual process, not the centre of the design process itself. The design process has no centre. It is a network of linked events" (p. 10). Similarly, for both Takemusu Aiki and in Complexity Leadership Theory, the *process* of "leadership is too complex to be described as only the act of an individual or individuals; rather, it is a complex interplay of many interacting forces" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 314).

This PhD research aims to add to the existing conversations Lima (2006) describes as 'a growing map of maps' through visualising the complex network traversed in ideation flow – the 'ways' memes spread. Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) research found that people emerge from flow experiences more complex – the experience becomes 'autotelic' – the activity in itself becoming its own reward. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) highlights the Eastern martial arts as a specific form of flow:

The warrior strives to reach the point where he can act with lightening speed against opponents, without having to think or reason about the best defensive or offensive moves to make [...] the everyday experience of duality between mind and body is transformed into a harmonious one-pointedness of mind. (p. 106)

This paper is the synthesis of my PhD research gathered to date. The next research phase will analyse the ethno-autobiographic results in order to start the qualitative research phase.

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