

Theory as Process: “Keiko” and ‘Co-Creative Movement’.

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Abstract: This paper explores how designers can connect broader understandings of leadership with specific design knowledge to ‘manage’ their thinking within the ideation process. The research outlines creativity as a rigorous process – focusing on ‘how’ we think instead of purely ‘what’ we think, as design leaders in an ever-changing design environment. One way of understanding and reflecting on our existing disciplinary experience is through researching other creative “ways” such as the Japanese martial art of ‘Aikido’. Both designers and Aikidoka refine through practice – a process of shifting and reframing knowledge – with the awareness coming through 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. The aim of this autoethnographic research – based on a Grounded Theory approach to data evaluation [5] and participant observation techniques, is to structure and visualize the initial findings. The results analyze the conceptual possibilities of extending Aikido theory beyond the conventional ‘dojo’ setting in order to develop a systematic methodology for thinking about ‘co-creative movement’ as a specific form of flow [3] for enabling knowledge exchange.

Key words: *Creativity Theory, Co-Creation, Design, Aikido, PhD.*

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how designers can potentially ‘manage’ their thinking within the ideation process through researching the rigorous practices involved in other creative “ways” such as the Japanese martial art of ‘Aikido’. Regarded as one of the most difficult and effective of the martial arts, 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 [12]. 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 [14] become almost simultaneous – ‘to be able’ or to become ‘other-wise’. The research explores the conceptual possibilities of blending Aikido theories with specific design knowledge, beyond the conventional ‘dojo’ setting, within distributed problem solving and team-based multi-disciplinary practice. This paper provides the initial findings on the extent to which design leadership based in Aikido can transform ‘co-creative movement’ – an embodied theory of co-operative creative action.

2. Method

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 [7], an increasing number of Aikidoka have been creatively extending Aikido practice outside the conventional dojo setting and influencing fields such as education, psychology, health, business, sports, music and the military. Aikido’s versatility offers a creative answer to any kind of attack, and involves learning experientially both with and through the body. Aikido cannot be practiced conceptually and “unless you do Aikido movements you can’t actually know how they feel and what they ultimately mean” [10]. The embodied knowledge gained is learnt through recurrent practices – within a context of action – that transcends words and language. Both designers and Aikidoka refine through practice and awareness comes in the ‘doing’. In Aikido this process is conveyed by the Japanese word “keiko” (Figure 1) which means “to train, to practice, to learn, or to engage in” [9]. This ‘rigorous attention’ is gained in the dojo environment – a space for “learning and being in-formed by practice for building theory reflexively, thus developing and interplaying iterative, cyclical, and spiraling movements between theory and action” [6].



Figure 1. “Keiko”.

In order to understand the transformative opportunities of Aikido the researcher began training – getting involved – in Aikido Shinryukan. Since 2007 this autoethnographic research has employed a Grounded Theory approach [2,5] and participant observation techniques to collect rich data on the culture, customs and practices of people who train regularly in Aikido at a local dojo. This type of research enables identification of traditions, specific patterns of behaviour, use of language, and symbols.

Table 1. Method and Results

Method	Grounded Theory
Data collection	Field Notes, Participant Observation techniques
Data Analysis Method	Focused coding
Data Results	Initial research findings: ‘common center’, ‘zanshin’, ‘hipparu’, ‘extension’

This paper examines the practice of Aikido as a 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’ [8] – to guide the creative leadership of others.

3. Results and Discussions

The research findings indicate that the dojo is an ideal ‘learning laboratory’ – a collaborative social system where Aikidoka practice with various kinds of people and discover Aikido within themselves by studying what works, how and why it works, and what doesn’t work: combining theory and practice to generate a systematic methodology for thinking about ‘co-creative movement’ as a specific form of flow [3].

Today's design environment is an increasingly cross-disciplinary. The emerging co-creative context means designers need to rethink old approaches and learn new process skills. Aikido is centered on relationships, collaboration and conflict resolution, incorporating the freedom to adapt, improvise and 'make things up' through movement practices which are circular, spiral and semi-spiral 'blending' and 'entering'. The Aiki Way echoes Pope's [11] co-operative view of creativity which he defines "as working and playing with and with respect to others". 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'. In Ueshiba's opinion, Aikido's secret is how you move your mind, not your feet, and this centers on exploring how we each move through the world and interact with others – a '*common center*' – as a way of being in the world.

In a co-creative process you have to be fluid, stay focused and be inventive. Ueshiba [13] described this state as a 'stillness in movement,' which revolves around the 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. The dynamic tension in-between chaos and order often involved in the idea generation phase of a co-creative process suits a multidisciplinary mind that can view problems from a variety of angles. The integrative Aikido practice of '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). Jiyu-waza 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. Additionally, even after an Aikido technique has been completed one should remain attentive and balanced. This "following through" of technique – '*zanshin*' – has both physical and cognitive dimensions based around the position that there is nothing more special about having completed a technique than there is about beginning or continuing it.

There are no limits to the ways in which we can be attacked, or ways in which we can respond. Aikido is flexible, adaptable, and advances new kinds of response. Associated movements such as '*hipparu*' – meaning to pull, to draw, or to stretch with the energy of your challengers – involve synchronizing to enable co-creative flow. Design leadership, according to Basadur [1], "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". Beyond the individual, design leaders need new process leadership skills in order to collaborate with others in inter-relational cross-disciplinary creative practice – processes of '*extension*' – and models of coordination for moving and facilitating the efficient communication of memes within co-creative environments.

4. Conclusions

This autoethnographic research 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 – an embodied theory of creative action. Aikido integrates mind-body learning and new kinds of experience for reflecting on how we think and act as design leaders in an ever-changing design environment – the "practitioner, practice and act are not separated, but relationally intertwined in the *actual* experience" [6]. The '*common center*', '*zanshin*',

'hipparu', and 'extension' of Aikido practice echo the continuous, circular flow of the creative process – although for Friedman [4] 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”.

This paper is the synthesis of the PhD research gathered to date. The next research phase will involve refining the conceptual categories and undertaking a series of semi-structured interviews.

5. References and Citations

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