

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF
PEER PRODUCTION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

LIFE SKILLS FOR PEER PRODUCTION: WALKING TOGETHER THROUGH A SPACE OF “NOT-KNOWING”

Where you are: [Home](#) · [Issues](#) · [Issue #11: City](#) · [Experimental format](#) · [Life Skills for Peer Production: Walking Together through a Space of “Not-Knowing”](#)

By **Vincenzo Mario Bruno Giorgino and Donald A. McCown**

The community of readers of the special issue, “City,” of the Journal of Peer Production—social activists, hackers, digital designers, radical academics, and students—will be seeking innovative ideas in commons-based programs at the urban level, particularly application of technological devices and concepts designed with an alternative, post-capitalist, communitarian orientation. The process of developing an innovative idea into a practical viable application is well understood within this community, and there are many templates to follow. These might be thought of as “soft skills.” However, such templates dance around the uncontrollable moment of inspiration. There is a space of fear, where there is no control, no certainty. The community must abide in not-knowing until the moment of inspiration. There are no templates or programs that offer assured outcomes; however, there are technologies of a different type that can help to keep the community attentive and open—to what is observable, to one another, and to new possibilities. These might be thought of as “life skills.” They are not reducible to rules that can be learned by rote, rather, they are infinitely variable and only can only be instilled as they are lived. It is to be demonstrated that inspiration arises not from a “lone genius” but rather from a like-minded group with a capacity to hold each member in the moments of fear before innovation is made real. Louis Pasteur suggested from an individualistic point of view that “fortune favors the prepared mind.” We suggest that “fortune favors the prepared community.”

Dear Don,

As we agreed to share our experiences about a contemplative approach to our life and society with our readers, I would like to begin with a poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado:

Traveler, your footprints are the path,

and nothing else.

Traveler, there is no path.

A path is made by walking.

A path is made by walking,

and in looking back one sees

the trodden road that never

will be set foot on again.

Traveler, there is no path,

but wakes on the sea.

Caminante, son tus huellas

el camino y nada más;

Caminante, no hay camino,

se hace camino al andar.

Al andar se hace el camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante no hay camino
sino estelas en la mar.

Antonio Machado Extracto de Proverbios y cantares (XXIX), Retrieved from: <http://www.poemas-del-alma.com/antonio-machado-caminante-no-haycamino.htm#ixzz4NhSJv8p>

Whatever the pathway you are following, the more thoroughly you go into it the more you encounter the uncertainty of the unknown.

In a recent study in Barcelona, Manuel Castells and his collaborators (Conhill et al. 2012) found that is difficult to define an alternative economy or society, as the common belief expressed by the people interviewed involved in what are called alternative practices simply is to do something against the current system, seen as an homogeneous mechanism. Feeling against the current status quo let us concentrate our energies against something existent, avoiding the fear of what is not yet—the unknown. It seems to be a successful strategy, especially if supported by an “objective” reading of the system, which attributes its own laws, like the recent return of attention to Marx testifies.

I appreciate Machado’s lyric because it invites us to meet our fears. This emotional process is part of any uncharted cognitive route, but it is also very common in our daily interactions. Very often fear is the mother of all angers. When it is shared at community level in response to a social injustice we should be aware of the ongoing process (fear/anger) individually and collectively.

I believe that our collective response is strongly influenced by the emotional state of the individuals. If the latter is regulated, moving towards equanimity, we have more chances that the community effect could move us towards justice.

Enzo

Dear Enzo,

Yes, I will fall right into step with you. Our daily work, and particularly our work as collaborators, is indeed travel into the unknown. There is fear of not understanding each other, of not finding the right direction, of getting off track. There is fear of another kind of lostness, of being stuck in one place—in the ennui of repetition and imposed boundaries. And, of course, there is the overriding fear of judgment from without...and within.

We must work with our fears. Yet, how we navigate them, to keep our creative energy going without burning out and to be open to others' ideas without shutting down, is not necessarily a matter of the hard skills we rely on to produce our work. It is not even a matter of the "soft skills" so often touted by the experts who promise to boost effectiveness and efficiency, such as leadership, conflict resolution, and problem solving. Rather, the skills that help are life skills—ways of being in the world. We can learn to live in a state of unknowing, and of openness to the new, the challenging, and the other.

I submit to you this documentary photograph of a moment in 1967 as an illustration of the potential of this approach.



This is Richard Long's piece called "A line made by walking." We can imagine his process of creative perception and its working out in the world. The line might have been walked with gritted teeth, braced arms and tense legs, with worries about its shape and edges; or perhaps in staggering boredom; or, most likely, in a moment-by-moment sense of unknowing, which would be a freshness of approach to each passage. Indeed, that is a key life skill, to meet each event (the first or the hundredth iteration) with what the Zen people call "beginner's mind."

And, mirabile dictu, we can make this life skill a part of our way of being through the simple, repetitious, unknowing practice of walking. We're

doing it plenty of the time anyway! I put together a three-minute recording



that walks you through (sorry, couldn't resist!) the idea and attitudes. Once we've practiced this formally a time or two, we can just bring this into our day on the way to the bathroom, to a meeting, in an aisle of the food store. What do you find, Enzo? Does this fit your way of working—and being?

Yours in the not-knowing now,

Don

Dear Don,

I agree with your observations and more than that: I can say that I feel, I experience, what you are suggesting. In general terms, this capacity is part of human skills, maybe not only human, but animal and maybe even plant life skills, as well. (linked articles: Marc Bekoff, "animal life skills": <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaeltobias/2012/05/21/the-hearts-and-minds-of-animals-a-discussion-with-dr-marc-bekoff/#6cb57b0acb8d>; Plants: Monica Gagliano "Animal-Like Learning in Mimosa Pudica", unpublished, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/23/the-intelligent-plant> ; Monica Gagliano (2017) The mind of plants: Thinking the unthinkable, Communicative & Integrative Biology, 10:2, e1288333, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19420889.2017.1288333> ; Stefano Mancuso 2010 TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/stefano_mancuso_the_roots_of_plant_intelligence.)

Nevertheless, it can happen that we live with a beginner's mind from time to time, but I doubt its persistence. This is probably the reason why we are usually invited to cultivate this capacity systematically, especially when involved more emotionally in a specific situation. Otherwise, as it does not manifest itself spontaneously, we remain wrapped in personal whirling.

As a sociologist, I wish to add that these skills are social practices invented by someone else, given to others, and incorporated in what is

usually identified as a tradition of religious or philosophical wisdom. Such traditions can be reservoirs of precious methods that we can draw from and experiment with in our everyday life. As you say, even now, we may transform this dialogue through a form of applied contemplative practice.

Moreover, feeling fearful for different reasons is a very common experience: it is grounded in our interactions with others. Apart from the two of us now, a feeling of dearth is also what we usually can feel in social contexts where we are deceived in our expectations. Like walking downtown in a Western city and seeing numbers of closed shops, as happened to me in August, when I attended a Conference in Athens (see the video and photos below).



The announcement “For Rent” (Enoikiazetai) is so frequent that it becomes a silent scream in the urban landscape. A single, temporary ad is not menacing our lives, it’s the suffering of a few for a short time, so our trust in a solution remains intact. However, when it becomes a pattern not limited in time, a subtle sense of insecurity pervades even foreign passers-by. The suffering of those directly involved becomes our private suffering, in a way. What comes next? Resignation? Depression? Anger?



Figure 1: Vincenzo Giorgino, Kallithea Borough, Athens, August 31, 2017

BTW, I am just following a free association that popped up from your reference to the walking of Richard Long's land sculpture. Nevertheless, I am aware that I linked this association to a visible phenomenon and not to those invisible events that can be charged even with much more suffering and many different emotions, such as unemployment in the Greek working class or the job precariousness of many in these times, especially among the youngest.



Figure 2: Vincenzo Giorgino, Kallithea Borough, Athens, August 31, 2017; The shop is closed and a man from Maghreb is ready to sell his goods in a mobile, simplified, and illicit—but tolerated—form.

The aim of this management being the reduction both of our personal suffering and of collective suffering. I imagine our readers committed to the creation of new forms of provisioning, characterized by collaborative commoning. I feel myself too into the picture, and I would like to contribute as well, not limiting to the individual level, but contextualizing and situating.



Figure 3: Vincenzo Giorgino, Kallithea Borough, Athens, August 31, 2017

A brief citation of Nelson Mandela's experience by Martha Nussbaum could be enlightening about social justice and our inner emotional work:

... Writing to Winnie in prison in 1975, he says most people are unluckily concerned with “social position”: instead, they should be interested in their inner development. Mandela knew that most people are very worried about status. Leadership, for him, meant patient training of capacities, just as an athlete is preparing, and a skill he consistently trained was just to understand how others thought. So he understood that to disarm the resistance, one had to disarm the anxiety first, and that this would never have been possible with anger or rancor, but only with kindness and respect for the dignity of others. The secret of good relations with guards—often polluted by class attrition—was “respect, simple respect”

So, Mandela not only carefully avoided the way of rage motivated by the social condition, he also understood it in others with empathy and then managed to skillfully calm it. As for the desire for restitution, this Mandela also knew well, and applied it in his life. He recalls some incidents that made him furious. “That injustice burned me,” he says of a case at the Fort Hare school. In addition, anger was not always lurking, but it was also at one point the crucial push for politics: “I did not have a blast, a sudden revelation, a moment of truth; it was the slow accumulation of a myriad of offenses, of a myriad of indifference, of a myriad of forgotten moments that caused me to anger, rebellion, and desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was not a particular moment in which he said: From here on, I will consecrate myself to the liberation of my people; instead, I simply found myself doing it, and I could not do otherwise.” From Martha C. Nussbaum, 2016, *Anger and Forgiveness. Resentment, Generosity, and Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press. Following Nussbaum, Mandela relied on two main inspirational sources: the concept of Ubuntu, “the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity,” which comes from the Zulu and Xhosa cultures (see also Gade Christian B.N. 2012 “What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent”, *S. Afr. J. Philos.* 31(3): 484-503), and the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*.

Dear Don, in closing my email, I discover that you opened with the topic of fear and I turned to anger. I do not think I have derailed our correspondence, as these are often described as having a parent-daughter relationship. Can the help we offer be to facilitate many emotional births that are devoid of destructive feelings?

John Coltraine’s “A Love Supreme” can now accompany us in this walking.

1964 - John Coltrane - A Love Supreme



Keep on walking. And wondering.

Hugs,

Enzo

Dear Enzo,

Thank you for the wise thoughts and the Coltrane music! How inspiring it is to hear it again in this context.

Our capacity to calm our own fears and thereby work creatively with the energy of our anger is, indeed, key to how we all may keep on walking together. Certainly your references to Mandela illustrate not only the parent-daughter relation of fear and anger, but also the possibility for transformation—personal and social—that may be found in both emotions, when we can be with them without giving in to them or pushing them away. Coltrane’s great suite names the methodology for us: the title of Part 1 is “Acknowledgement,” which ends with all of those overdubbed Coltrane voices chanting “a love supreme” like a mantra. When we notice how we are in any moment, and acknowledge the thoughts, emotions, and even physical sensations and impulses that are showing up, we are at the trailhead on the way to supreme love, and ready to take a first step—small or giant:

John Coltrane - Giant Steps



Reaching the point of acknowledgement very often requires application of simple but powerful technology, however. When we see the Nth “For Rent” sign on a walk through a historically great city, fear and anger may arise, a likely shift for the activists among us. So, what do we do? How do we stay with what we are experiencing so that we can see it clearly and make choices that will help? The wisdom traditions all point to a technology that is fundamental to our lives: our breath.

The breath is an instrument that plays us, and that we can play on, when we are attentive and acknowledging our moment-to-moment state. It is the only process among those regulated by our autonomic nervous system (ANS) that we can—in some small way—control. The ANS responds to our perception of threat or challenge by offering us more physical energy to work with, through the fight-or-flight response,

which we often call stress. Our heart rate and blood pressure rise, muscle tone increases (which we perceive as tension). We are energized by surges of norepinephrine and epinephrine (adrenaline). The body in its wisdom also saves energy by down-regulating the digestive and immune systems. Even our thinking changes, as we focus on finding other possible threats in our environment. All of this happens automatically. It's rarely comforting or comfortable, even though the response developed evolutionarily to be helpful to us. Standing and looking at the "For Rent" sign, or reading about such situations on our screens does not give us an opportunity to react with the huge burst of physical energy we are prepared for. We are stuck.

The breath, then, is the little window of opportunity we have in all of this bodily activity. As part of the reaction, the breath also speeds up and becomes more shallow, emphasizing breathing in. Since the ANS is wired so that the in-breath turns on the fight-or-flight response, this sets up a feedback loop that keeps us feeling stressed. The good news, however, is that the out-breath turns on the opposite response of rest-and-repair. We can leverage that fact to get ourselves un-stuck.

As we notice and acknowledge how it is in that stressful moment, we can break the loop—we can breathe in deeply and then breathe out long in what might best be characterized as a sigh. Done in series—say, three or more in a row—this sighing can change how we feel in our bodies, reducing the tension, changing our threat-focused thinking, and offering freedom to approach the next moment creatively. I like to think of Coltrane's playing in this mode: very long out-breaths—sighing against oppression, and yearning towards the possibility of human connection and a love supreme.

This mode of breathing is helpful, certainly, in moments of distress. But it is also a practice. We can bring it into our days regularly—maybe morning, noon, and night—to keep us un-stuck, open, ready to act in deliberate, creative, loving ways towards whatever we meet. No longer so ruled by the "family" of fear and anger.

I'll close this missive with some concise instructions for this practice that I share often, with whoever will listen (to the transcendent music).

The Relaxing Sigh:

Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth, making a quiet, relaxing sigh as you exhale. Take long, slow, gentle breaths that raise and lower your abdomen as you inhale and exhale. Focus on the sound and feeling of the breath.

You can use cues throughout your daily routine to remind yourself to take three to six relaxing sighs (just before answering a phone call, before entering a meeting, when making a required decision, or even at set times on your calendar for the day).

Sighing and hoping as we walk together,

Don

Dear Don,

As you say breathing itself is a bio-social phenomenon, a mix of a voluntary and non voluntary act. And the power of this simple practice of mindful breathing is surprising, a social invention of two and a half millenniums ago, born among lay seekers of meaning of life.

For reasons too complex for this space, this knowledge was transformed in a set of beliefs and dogmas administered by a religious institution. With the emergence of the mindfulness movement we are experiencing the return to a secular approach.

So far, I would like to intend the lay version you are talking about as an invitation to experiment with as a commons. This is why, a few weeks ago, Zack Walsh and I created a blog on the contemplative commons: a free space in which participants engaged in the contemporary social transformation and are curious about these practices, and those who already have got some expertise in them and are curious about the digital commons can meet together, adding value to their respective skills.

<https://www.loomio.org/g/oVUOrcTq/contemplative-commons>

The blog is complementary to the workshop Zack and Ed Ng planned at the IASS in Potsdam <http://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/content/workshop-towards-contemplative-commons> this past August, which dealt with the separation between two practices: the technologies focused on the present moment of the self and those enabling humans to transform in unprecedented ways their social and economic interactions.

The pursuit of co-design of the latter affirms the relevance of human beings in front of the dominant approach to smart cities. Individual and collective skills of caring for themselves, others and the environment can fulfill the expectation to make the world that best fits with our values. At the same time, we are aware of the current inadequacy of the shared mindset about what is work, what is business, and what is life: our past certainties lose ground and we are more and more confused by the emerging digital tools, especially for the last striking of them, the distributed ledger technologies. An encounter seems unavoidable and I hope some help can come from the book I co-edited with Zack Walsh:

Co-designing the Economies in Transition, Palgrave Mcmillan, <http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319665917>

In fact, the practices we're discussing bring us to a place where we can see more clearly what we need to do in such a messy and disruptive context of promises and possibilities—particularly in the ways our actions may affect the social and natural contexts. They can help us to give home to the collective “blessed unrest”, as Paul Hawken named a shared feeling of widespread derangement in the world.

Is there more that you have been thinking?

Enzo

Dear Enzo

Indeed, it is true that when we pause—if only for one breath—space opens for a new thought, or a deeper response. That is the power of the life skills we're discussing, which not only bring us a pause, but also somehow open our hearts. The turn we are making towards including others in our writing suggests that.

My thoughts—after our latest pause—are all about connection and commoning. I want to emphasize that we learn these life skills for each other, in a way. When I am balanced and able to pause, I am a different kind of presence for you. Because of the way that our brains are built, if you see me being calm, the mirror neurons in your brain mimic that calmness in you—you “try on” the way that I am, and it becomes more possible for you to be that way, and to pause, yourself. (Marco Iacoboni's book, *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others*, Picador, 2009, tells the story quite well.) And that's just half of it.

The other half brings us even closer together. It seems that we not only have automatic responses to threats, like the “fight or flight” response that gives us tremendous physical energy or the “freeze” response that shuts us down when we are overwhelmed with fear. On the other side of such reactions, we have an automatic reaction to feeling safe. Stephen Porges's work over several decades (described succinctly in *The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe*, Norton, 2017) describes this as the “social engagement” response: our heart rate slows, our ears tune to the sound of the human voice, and all the muscles involved in speech get more tone—we are ready to make a social connection. And here's the cherry on top; when this response happens, we get a release of oxytocin, the

“bonding” hormone that deepens relationships.

So, now, here’s what I find so compelling: If one person uses a life skill to move to calmness, the others that she meets may be drawn along. If a number of people use a life skill together, the group has a much greater chance of becoming calm, and that group also feels safe. It shares physiological possibilities to listen better, to pause, to speak more articulately, and—most important—to care about each other and the world in more profound ways.

If I may be allowed a postscript, it would be this—a three-minute life skill practice that actually was developed to deal with the fear and anger family! It’s called “the soles of the feet.” I adapted it from the work of Nirbhay Singh and his colleagues (Singh, N.N., Wahler, R.G., Adkins, A.D., & Myers, R.E., Soles of the feet: A mindfulness-based self-control intervention for aggression by an individual with mild mental retardation and mental illness, *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 2003, 24:158-169).

The Steps

1. If you are sitting, make yourself comfortable, with the soles of both feet on the floor. If you are standing, stand in a natural posture, allowing the weight of the arms to pull the shoulders down, and bending the knees slightly. If you are walking, slow your pace and, again, allow the arms to help relax the shoulders.
2. Allow your breath to flow naturally. And allow yourself to feel the emotions of the moment, being aware of whatever thoughts and body sensations are arising, without restricting or attempting to change them. Simply observe.
3. Then move your attention to the soles of your feet. Feel your heels on the floor or inside your shoes; feel the curves of the arches, the balls of the feet, and the toes — perhaps moving the toes to make them more present in sensation.
4. After a moment or two, notice again the quality of thoughts and body sensations.
5. When you feel as if you can respond and not react, remember that you can choose to disengage, or choose to respond with clarity and creativity.

Special considerations

1. We all feel stress and strong emotions. The object of this practice is not to stamp them out but to work with them creatively.
2. In context, the feelings of the moment may hold valuable information that can be used for a positive solution or helpful response.

3. You can rehearse this practice to gain more confidence in its use by playing scenarios from the past (or the future!) in your imagination and working with the emotions and body sensations that are generated just by thought.

And so, Enzo, the “soles of the feet” can make it possible for us all to walk together through the space of “not-knowing.”

Glad to be with you,

Don

Dear readers and commoners,

We invite you to open a dialogue on this topic on loomio at the blog contemplative commons:

<https://www.loomio.org/d/DHymjSu8/life-skills-for-peer-production-walking-together-through-a-space-of-not-knowing>

Enzo and Don

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