

Fundamental Principles of Collaborative Design:

The MG Taylor Axioms

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Author's Note: The Axioms were developed by Matt and Gail Taylor in the early 1980's based on their emerging experience and awareness of the principles that govern group genius. They were not originally predicated upon behavior of groups in DesignShop® events, rather, they were noticed in a variety of other fields from architecture to education before they crystallized in the invention of the DesignShop process. Therefore, the axioms may be applied broadly beyond the scope of MG Taylor® products and services. Having said that, the following exposition of the axioms is my interpretation alone and may only casually resemble their original meaning. After all, to add someone else's experience . . . ;-/

The Value of Demonstrating the Unprovable

Beneath any practiced science or art lies a body of unproven propositions. The experienced practitioner holds that when these propositions are diligently applied, they secure the highest value and the most consistent reliability in results. A codified body of such unproven guideposts are called axioms.

This is the first of a series of articles which explain and explore the axioms and touch on how they apply to the design and implementation of [DesignShop events](#) and how they might be used in daily life as well.

The application of these axioms is both linear and nonlinear. As statements of fact, they can be accepted and applied directly, like a set of rules. When applied in this causal fashion, you may expect certain repeatable effects each time you invoke them. There is a one-to-one relationship between employing the axiom and experiencing its outcome. In this sense, they are reductionist and represent the nomenclature and anatomy of [creativity](#) as it is practiced in the MG Taylor approach to collaboration.

In another sense, they are holistic and require of the learner leaps of intuition to bridge the gap between understanding and application. One can learn the principles of good composition in art: they can be listed and memorized and identified in examples. However, applying these successfully in an original work requires the artist to fold them into her experience. There are no formulas. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the axiom and its expression. But you can see evidence of the axiom in the expression.

Experiment with these two ways of approaching the axioms. Apply them as rules and look to see the result. Fold them into your understanding of the nature of things, then begin designing events from a new perception of how things might work without trying to fit the axioms and your design together like some kind of puzzle. Make them your own as you learn to apply them.

The Bold Claim

Here's the fundamental proposition: If the axioms are applied to a DesignShop process or any other collaborative event facilitated within the [7 Domains](#) with diligence and discipline, the event will be successful. Period. Nothing else required. Quite a proposition.

But there's no point in equivocating when attempting to divine the secrets of collaboration, group genius and creativity. Set a stake in the ground and survey the terrain around it. Then see if the map is of any long term value. Chances are you'll disagree with several of the axioms or think of the whole set as incomplete. Whether you are correct in your analysis is largely irrelevant. **This sounds like a demand for complete, unthinking acceptance of the axioms. Nothing could be further from the truth. The axioms must be challenged. But they can't be challenged in the sterile caverns of intellectual argument, instead they are investigated in the field of practice.** Apply them and observe the results.

There are thirteen or fourteen axioms, depending upon how they are written. I've chosen to represent them as fourteen--in this scheme, numbers four, five and six each stand on their own. Even if you've seen or heard them hundreds of time, take a few moments now to read them again. Hold a scenario or picture in your mind while you're reading. Here's what I mean: imagine some portion of an organization you work with and see people within it applying the axioms (in whatever fashion you understand them at this point--there's no expertise necessary for this exercise). If the people in your organization don't practice the axioms, then invent imaginary situations in which they do practice them and follow these situations through in your thinking. If you'd like to be a bit more daring, picture an entire natural ecosystem (whether it's a rain forest, or your own garden) and see how the axioms play out in a non-human world. Don't make this exercise too analytical or cumbersome--just hold the images and scenarios lightly and see what pops up. Keep a [personal journal](#) of your ideas (many of which won't be related to the axioms at all!).

No, I really mean it. Pick up a journal now and do this :-). If you're intrigued by what MG Taylor Corporation has been doing for the last 25 years, then you've arrived at the stillpoint, the center of the whole venture. Take time to understand these axioms.

1. The future is rational only in hindsight.
2. You can't get there from here but you can get here from there.
3. Discovering you don't know something is the first step to knowing it.
4. Everything someone tells you is true: they are reporting their [experience](#) of reality.
5. To argue with someone else's experience is a waste of time.
6. To add someone else's experience to your experience--to create a new experience--is possibly valuable.
7. You understand the instructions only after you have assembled the red wagon.
8. Everyone in this room has the answer. The purpose of this intense experience is to stimulate one, several, or all of us to extract and remember what we already know.
9. [Creativity](#) is the elimination of options.
10. If you can't have fun with the [problem](#), you will never solve it.
11. The only valid test of an idea, concept or theory is what it enables you to do.
12. In every adverse condition there are hundreds of possible solutions.
13. You fail until you succeed.
14. Nothing fails like success.

I'm going to repeat the axioms below. This time they've been separated into groups. Think through what each group may mean and give it a name, or describe it in a phrase.

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There is no right answer to either of the preceding exercises. In fact, no one in the MG Taylor network has ever presented the axioms grouped as I have done above. However, it may be useful to begin an understanding of the axioms through a discussion of the four sub-groupings.

Past, Present, and Future: Embracing Ignorance to Navigate Through Time

1. The future is rational only in hindsight.
2. You can't get there from here but you can get here from there.
3. Discovering you don't know something is the first step to knowing it.

We don't know what we don't know, and that includes the future. Ironically, it also **includes the past because events that have transpired, and their meaning changes with our vantage point.** Despite this ignorance of our ignorance, we tend to create causal arrows--supposed chains of events that have led or guided us through some portion of our lives that appear to be rational extrapolations from one to the other. From our position looking back, these chains may appear very logical; the world may seem like a natural, unavoidable extension of the past. But when we look forward from the present and apply what appear to be sound extrapolations, our predictions founder.

Vision rationalizes the irrational. And vision is not a compilation of wishes, or a sketchy set of predictions. Vision is an experience of reality through the medium of sight, **therefore it is very tangible. Vision allows us to define the something that we don't know and thereby take the first step towards knowing it.** You can never travel towards a vision. Once you find and inhabit a vision, you bring it whole and intact to the present. You bring it from there to here. That's how creation works: it's not blind.

The vision begins as an unknown. Admitting this fact makes it easier to discover, uncover, and embrace particular visions--to live within them and walk in them. After such a powerful [Spoze](#) exercise, it's possible to look back upon our current situation from a truly new vantage point. We are changed and then we bring that change back to what we call the present.

Of course, it helps if you don't have to search through the unknown on your own. That leads us to the next set of axioms.

The Unfolding and Enfolding of Shared Experience

4. Everything someone tells you is true: they are reporting their [experience](#) of reality.
5. To argue with someone else's experience is a waste of time.
6. To add someone else's experience to your experience--to create a new experience--possibly valuable.

Physicist David Bohm has described the principle of enfoldment in his book, *Unfolding Meaning: A Weekend of Dialogue*. The one-sentence summary states that the entire universe is enfolded into each of its components and that the visible universe is the movement or process of enfolding and unfolding--the reflexive transit between principle and expression. **We are literally the enfolding and unfolding of our experience.**

Communicating our experience of something is necessarily attenuated. Feelings, textures, colors, sounds, the pattern of sensations dancing across time and out of time, are all incompressible--they can't be shared by the spoken word. Someone can only report to you *about* their experience. Since you can't truly understand the experience from their vantage point, the only wise course of action is to accept it at face value and move forward together or move further apart from that acceptance. The big danger about arguing over someone else's experience rises if one of the parties actually wins the argument, at which point, some critical understanding and vantage point on the universe--and the resulting learning--is denied and lost.

Experience is not really additive. The creation of a new experience is a non-linear event. When two or more individuals really "add" their experiences together, something magical happens and the result is always more, and different than what any of them expected. Such an experience is information-rich and therefore must emerge as a [surprise](#). There's **no information in events which don't include surprise.**

Sometimes people read the sixth axiom and imagine that it refers to adding someone else's *past experience* to your *past experience*. That's impossible. The past is no longer experience but only encoded information *about* experience. So, to add someone else's experience to your experience is to touch, share and create something together that you can't create alone. **It's choosing to generate an experience between the two of you--to go at risk together.** To create it by drawing upon the encoded information of your collective pasts and adding to that the effort of creating shared vision and then walking together to bring that vision back to the present. All of which--after all of the effort, tears and joy--may be of enduring value. **But the effort, the journey and the trust, remain sublime.**

Of course, the saddest comment upon the human condition arises from the witness to our efforts to argue with one another's experience, past, present and vision--to consume life by fighting over the only gift we have to share with each other.

But creating new experience together is far from easy. How should we approach the process?

Comprehending Laughter, Value and the Infinite Solution Set

7. You understand the instructions only after you have assembled the red wagon.
8. Everyone in this room has the answer. The purpose of this intense experience is to stimulate one, several, or all of us to extract and remember what we already know.
9. [Creativity](#) is the elimination of options.
10. If you can't have fun with the [problem](#), you will never solve it.
11. The only valid test of an idea, concept or theory is what it enables you to do.
12. In every adverse condition there are hundreds of possible solutions.

The only axiom that shows some aging since the early 80's is number seven. Not many children receive red wagons for Christmas anymore, and not many parents spend Christmas Eve pawing desperately through a pile of parts and flipping anxiously through a cryptic set of instructions trying to figure out which parts go where so that the gleaming finished product will be ready by morning. This is a ritual that may belong only to mid-twentieth century America. However, anyone who has ever tried to assemble anything according to instructions may agree with me that the event is a learning process. Upon successful completion of the assembly, the individual has demonstrated a competent understanding of the instructions in a practical and undeniable way.

The instructions serve only as a template in the process of learning. They must be translated to become valuable. Templates of instructions may be found all around us, enfolded in nature and unfolding to our comprehension. They must be [recreated](#) into actions to be embodied in our experience. Only there can they be tested.

Of course, red wagons and other mechanical inventions usually have only a single solution to their successful assembly. Our lives are much different. **Assembling a life involves sorting not through piles of parts, but through universes of solutions.** Choosing from among those equally viable visions is the work of Creativity and the creative process. The empty canvas enfolds the myriad of expressions. A single brush stroke attenuates the options but reveals more. The next stroke continues the **pattern of definition and revelation.** The reduction of options creates more options. The finished piece will unfold an entirely new universe of meaning to all who see it.

If you've never sat in the middle of a problem surrounded by chaotic piles of parts and half-understood instructions--if you've never faced the incongruities of life and not laughed, then those incongruities will never dis-solve or re-solve from one useful, vibrant form to another. The Universe has a sense of humor: feel free to indulge yourself.

Oh, you're wondering about the adverse condition? Pausing during the dance while the music is still playing--that's the adverse condition. Falling out of harmony and missing the beat. A little laughter and a hand extended to share and create a new experience will help you move in time with the drums once more.

What makes the resolution of the adversity smooth (but not easy) in the face of multiple options is the fact that **we already have the answer enfolded within us individually and collectively.** **Genius is the release of that answer.** The release, when tested with rigor and found valuable, yields success.

Choosing to Fail and Succeed

13. You fail until you succeed.
14. Nothing fails like success.

Think about axiom thirteen carefully. On its surface it implies that multiple iterations of practice or effort are required to bring about the necessary coordination of activities which may elicit a valuable and graceful response to a systemic challenge. It seems to say that you will fail *over and over* until you succeed.

That's one valuable reading of the axiom. There are others. For instance, you fail until you choose to succeed. Or until you choose to see your failures as successes. Or until you can live in your vision and draw upon its inspiration to recontextualize your understanding of reality.

At some point the categorization of experience into failures or successes loses its value and the experience is accepted at face value. Deep down, the last two axioms deny themselves.

The fourteenth axiom recalls the warning "whispered to all victorious Roman generals," that *all glory is fleeting*. Vision cannot rest, cannot remain stationary but roils and froths and spins like a madly dashing river, creating ever new vortices and whirlpools to which we are attracted. So the fall into failure comes only when we lose our childlike wonder and love for exploration and the magic of creation--when we try to preserve our footprints in the dissolving currency instead of following the river downstream in its course to create the next experience, divine the next set of instructions on the scroll of life, thrill and joy in the problem, live in the vision and bring it back to today, revel in discovering everything that we don't know, test our ideas against the press of everyday life, sift through the sand of infinite solutions, and succeed even in the face of adversity.

And of course there's no greater joy than to join with other children hand in hand down that rushing flight to the sea. 