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Rethinking innovation labs for complex adaptive systems going through release and reorganization

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Rethinking innovation labs for complex adaptive systems going through release and reorganization

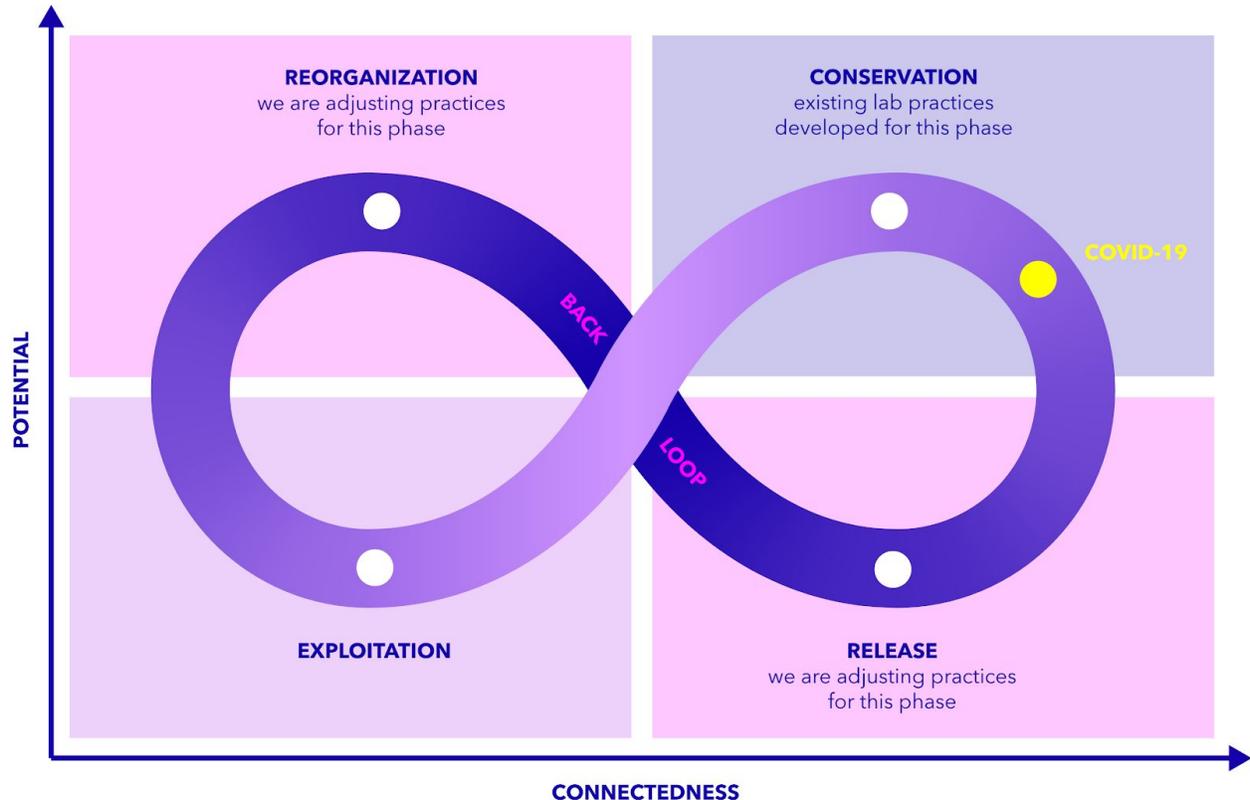
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When working within a complex adaptive system going through the release and reorganization phase of the adaptive cycle (Holling, 2001) how should innovation lab practices shift? We are exploring this question through an in-progress innovation lab facilitated by the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience. The Legacy Leadership Lab (L3) is situated at the intersection of the Canadian small business, social finance, and co-operative and social enterprise systems. The lab launched in 2019 and will continue into 2021 to explore systemic support for conversions of Canadian small- and medium-sized businesses into social purpose organizations. Originally, we intended to organize a variety of actors through a series of workshops to design initiatives that could be piloted by their organizations and communities. These plans were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not only foreclosed the possibility of gathering in-person, but, more fundamentally, has radically transformed economic and social systems. These systemic changes have provoked us to rethink the lab's focus and processes. Using Holling's (2001) adaptive cycle, we suggest that the systems we work within are now in the release and reorganization phase (the "back loop"), out of the conservation phase where they had been for some time (see Figure 1). This abstract outlines how we are shifting our lab practices for the changing systems we find ourselves in.

Innovation labs go by many names: social innovation labs (Westley et al., 2015), change labs (Westley, Geobey, & Robinson, 2012), social labs (Hassan, 2014), living labs, systemic innovation labs (Zivkovic, 2018), among others. These emerge from distinct communities, and practices vary between and even within each of these lineages (Kieboom, 2014). In essence, however, they share similar foundations. Labs are "container[s] for social experimentation, with a team, a process and space to support social innovation on a systemic level" (Kieboom, 2014). They draw on participatory design, design thinking, and systems thinking, and involve creating space for dialogue and sensemaking while stewarding a group of diverse stakeholders through a systemic design process (Tiesinga & Berkhout, 2014).

Figure 1 The Adaptive Cycle (adapted from Holling, 2001)



Since the 2008 financial crisis, labs have emerged and proliferated as a process for systemic innovation (Joy, Shields, & Cheng, 2019). Lab practices, while rooted in older traditions (Westley et al., 2015), were developed in the past decade while the global economic system remained consistent and entrenched. In Canada, during this period, our political and social systems have been similarly consistent and inflexible. From Holling's (2001) adaptive cycle lens, we suggest that lab practices were formed to drive innovation in the conservation phase, when systems are "over-connected and increasingly rigid." In this environment, the purpose of a lab is to explore "adjacent possibles" (Johnson, 2010) and anticipate responding to a future collapse. Along with others (e.g. Schroder, 2020; Worstell, 2020), we feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a transition from conservation to release. This collapse leads into "a period of rapid reorganization during which novel recombinations can unexpectedly seed experiments that lead to innovations in the next cycle" (Holling, 2001). In the release phase, the purpose of the lab is different; previously "adjacent possibles" are now competing basins of attraction. Overall, there is a greater need for collective sensemaking. Given that lab practices were designed for conservation-phases, we must consider a number of process changes. Here is an overview of how we are reorienting:

1. **Decentralized, asynchronous, and participant-led over structured workshop delivery.** With social distancing, we are trying to take advantage of virtual environments. This has opened up possibilities since we are not time- or space-bound by traditional workshops. Instead of gathering all participants together for activities, our participants have self-organized into working groups that can progress at

their own pace and meet more frequently for shorter feedback loops. We suggest possible routes through a design process, but ultimately, each group chooses the best way forward, which could mean prototyping sooner, or spending more time listening to the system before piloting an initiative.

2. **Prototyping in place over in the lab.** While we always intended to pilot initiatives in organizations and communities, we are prototyping in these environments sooner to more rapidly respond to needs.
3. **Increased permeability.** The boundaries of the lab have become looser, and we have a larger focus on supporting and growing initiatives that were initially developed outside the lab.
4. **Increased focus on building awareness of alternatives.** We have launched an arm to focus on community activation. This arm will work to spread awareness of the possibilities for social purpose conversions amongst specific communities. These communities could be linked geographically (e.g. a municipality), they could share a profession (e.g., economic development officers), or belong to the same economic sector (e.g., light manufacturing).
5. **Community of practice up front.** Upon completing the lab, we had planned to launch a community of practice around the lab's focus area, but we are prioritizing these networks and working to create this structure now for community support and co-learning.
6. **Principles over plans.** To adapt in a quickly changing system, our lab delivery team has aligned on principles and a vision without overly defining our plans going forward. This allows us to be more responsive to our participants and the system.

Over the course of the lab we will explore how to best support participatory design processes and change in the disrupted systems in which we situate ourselves. At the time of the RSD9 conference we will be able to provide additional commentary on our shifting lab processes that we will have been further experimenting with in the interim. Through reflective practice, participant feedback, and an evaluation of the lab outputs at that date (e.g., design prototypes, system maps and other knowledge products, a community of practice), we aim to provide guidance to innovation lab practitioners and systemic designers broadly as they consider reorienting their work in face of disrupted systems, while also commenting on how these shifts in practice could be beneficial or reintegrated into labs working in systems at other places in the adaptive cycle.

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