



Foundations of Design for Social Innovation

Course syllabus

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The gift you carry for others is not an attempt to save the world but to fully belong to it. It's not possible to save the world by trying to save it. You need to find what is genuinely yours to offer the world before you can make it a better place. Discovering your unique gift to bring to your community is your greatest opportunity and challenge. The offering of that gift—your true self—is the most you can do to love and serve the world. And it is all the world needs.

Bill Plotkin, *Soulcraft*

You cannot predict the outcome of human development; all you can do, like a farmer, is create the conditions under which it will begin to flourish.

Sir Ken Robinson

This course is an opportunity to transform the way you see and work in social situations. You will begin practices that can transform your ability to stand in good relationship with yourself and the people and communities you work within.

Design? Something else?

Our course has the word “design” in its title, but it is not a typical design course. We lack a word for the discipline and practice that is emerging in these times when creating together in change-resistant complexity is a mandate.

Design methods are powerful for creative problem-solving, but social situations are complex. Their patterns have emerged through history, their dynamics are mostly invisible, they are fraught with patterns of oppression and trauma, and it is impossible to directly design and implement change.

Gardening

Social systems—from families to organizations to global systems—are not problems to be solved or mechanisms to be repaired. They are living systems. Most of what we call “problems” are really *patterns* of story, conversation, relationship and behavior. What approaches and methods are potent for working intentionally in these gardens? What ways of seeing and being are needed to employ them?

This course sits on a frontier of theory and practice, and at the confluence of many disciplines. It provides an introduction to the fundamental theories, skills, methods and personal stances needed to address social system challenges—work which is fundamentally different from the center of design’s historical strengths.

Themes of the course

- The complexity of human experience, relationship, and systems
- The fact of oppression and trauma in the history and fabric of our systems and cultures, experienced to varying degrees by everyone
- The gifts and possibilities latent in any community
- Models of change at individual, group, and community scales
- The patterns of power in current systems, and the possibility of shifting power, decreasing dependency, and restoring community
- Fostering the conditions for generative participation and long-term transformation
- Skills and methods for listening, and for helping others listen
- Skills and methods for hosting conversation and co-creation
- Personal and relational skills and practices needed to work through difficulties and challenges that arises in this work
- Self care—seeing yourself as part of the world that is whole and worthy to be cared for

Course structure

Sessions will mix lecture, discussion, and activities. Between sessions, students will apply the previous sessions' lessons in practice, while readings and video assignments prepare them for the next session's activities.

Three in-person workshops

We will meet in person three times this semester: August 30, October 24, and December 5. The first workshop will be six hours long, the other two will be seven hours (with breaks). These are rich additions to the experience, and we ask that you make sure to attend unless something truly prevents you from being there. Come on time, wear comfortable clothes, and show up ready for hours packed with activity and depth.

Zoom sessions

The rest of our sessions will be held on Zoom, each Tuesday from 6:00pm to 8:30pm US Eastern time. Please be present for these—we will take attendance. We encourage you to use your camera if you can.

Typical sessions mix discussion and activities

Sessions will typically have the following components:

- discussion of readings, assignments and videos
- short lectures to introduce new materials
- activities, during which we apply the material from the readings—experiencing group methods, theater and art-based activities, etc.

Assignments include individual and group practices

Many weeks include an invitation to try applying what you've learned, sometimes by yourself and sometimes with others.

Group hosting project

One series of assignments builds throughout the semester to culminate in hosting a dialogue session. Your team will set an intention, and choose a method from the wide hosting and facilitation community of practice. We'll take this project step-by-step, and support your team in planning, preparing, conducting, and documenting the experience in a final document and video.

The three stories of the Fundamentals course

The story of creating in social complexity together

We come into this course holding the phrase, “Design for social innovation.” Examining those terms, we find a story that’s too small for the reality of the work.

DESIGN

An iterative process of attending, sense-making, and making. Design is potent for situations we can study and affect directly.

SOCIAL

A generic term for situations made of people in relationship. Relationships are invisible. They are born and maintained through conversation, through interaction. Social situations are complex. Their patterns emerge from many interactions between many participants. So we cannot depend on our usual design methods to understand and improve social situations.

INNOVATION

A term from industry, which values new ideas over old ones. In commerce, novelty is valuable. Commerce sees social situations through a lens of “problems” and “solutions.” And it seeks improvement through a quest for “innovations”—new ideas that present viable “solutions.”

Early in this course we let go of the idea that we are going to learn how to use Design to produce Social Innovations. Instead, we begin a life practice of growing our ability to take part in community co-creation. How can we garden conditions for new patterns to emerge? How can we create in social complexity together with others? How can this weaken harmful patterns and strengthen life-sustaining patterns?

The story of becoming and belonging: practices for self and relationship

In social systems, all the scales are tangled: individual, relational, group, community and society. If we seek a lasting shift in a community or organization, we’ll need the full diversity of the system. This requires coming into right relationship with people who differ from us. How can we collaborate when the community harbors distrust, past pain, and damaged relationships? Doing so means developing a new relationship with our own fear, discomfort, and unconscious defenses.

This course introduces the idea of practice—becoming more able to do what we cannot do through extended, repeated activities. Through practice we can become people who are able to stand in nurturing relationship with ourselves and one another, even when things are uncomfortable, difficult, or painful. To begin, we have the gift of ourselves and our cohort as a “lab” for practice.

The story of holding space: practices of hosting dialogue and co-creation

Small groups are the key unit of work in social pattern-shifting. Most of us are familiar with working in teams, which in industry are tend to be professional monocultures. Industry teams usually form to produce an external result. Their metrics of quality have to do with productivity and measurable outcomes. In the work we are preparing for in this class, the gatherings are must be more diverse. Relational and conversational outcomes must precede or coincide with visible outcomes.

In this course we practice the art of “holding space for conversation.” We cover basic dialogue theory and learn from project stories. And we work in small groups to plan, prepare for, and host a group dialogue.

Key themes 1



THE NATURE OF SOCIAL COMPLEXITY

Anthrocomplexity

An introduction to the dynamics of complexity, and how social complexity is special

Thought as a system and an introduction to dialogue

The importance of conversation and relationship in understanding human systems, from families to global systems

Oppression and trauma

Our current systems embody painful dynamics—part of the “material” of working socially. We can learn how this effects us and how we can shift and heal.

Key themes 2



THE NATURE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Models of large-scale, long-term change

We can't predict change in complexity, but models can help us work wisely.

Models of personal change

Personal, group, and systemic shifts are entangled; it is useful to learn their patterns.

A view of social pattern-shifting as an emergent process

Informed by many sources, we can suggest an approach to the work of social pattern-shifting.

Key themes 3



HOW DO WE WORK? SURVEYING ESSENTIAL METHODS AND SKILLS

Transformation and power

What does it look like when we shift the power of leadership and creation to the people who live the patterns of life we'd like to affect?

Emergent approaches

Overview and stories of approaches such as narrative inquiry, portfolios of probes, asset-based community development, social labs, etc.

Holding space: short-term and long-term

First, a view into a rich world of practice: hosting dialogue and facilitating co-creation. Then, an invitation to practice holding space for yourself, your team and others.

Course structure

Fourteen weekly sessions

With readings, audio and/or video before each session



Weekly reflections



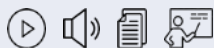
Practices and a group assignment

Most weeks will involve an assignment to practice a skill of personal development, relationship, or communication. In the final third of the semester, a series of group assignments will scaffold your preparation to apply a dialogue hosting method.

Final “gift”

A culmination of the weekly reflections, and a way to share our learning with the larger community of practice.

Canvas



Canvas is the central repository for class materials and assignments

Each week you'll find...

- Slides, recordings, and any other follow-up materials are posted to the Canvas module we've just completed.
- Any new assignments are posted in Canvas, with full instructions for what's expected.

Google Drive



Each student will have a private area on Google Drive

- Documents are visible only to the student and the professors.
- The main use: this is where students will write their weekly reflections, and where the professors will leave comments and weekly grades.

Schedule of topics and themes

August 30	September 5	12	19	26	October 3	10	17	24	31	November 7	14	28	December 5				
NYC 1	2	3	4	Marc in SA	5	6	7	8	9	10	Micky out	11	12	13	NYC 14		
Creating in social complexity together																	
D-S-I Playing with complexity	Ordered world, Unordered world	Listening together	Models of change in social complexity	Patterns of oppression and trauma	Patterns of power				Discernment using the Cynefin Model	Working with emergence	Facilitating participatory processes	Adaptive leadership					
Becoming and belonging: Practices for self and relationship																	
What it means to practice	Listening to your Self		Practicing acceptance	Noticing your ANS	Observing our emotions			Practicing honest communication (NVC)	NVC Part 2?	Practicing relationship repair?		Beautiful questions	Hosting Day! and Closing				
Holding space: Practices of dialogue and co-creation																	
	Active listening					Dialogue theory 101		Dialogue method sampler									
Key "Readings"																	
MIXTAPE Experiencing Complexity	MIXTAPE Listening Together	MIXTAPE Models of Change	MIXTAPE Why Center Oppression and Trauma?	MIXTAPE Shifting Power	MIXTAPE Holding Space	MIXTAPE TBD	VIDEO PLAYLIST Hosting methods	MIXTAPE Big plans, small acts	VIDEO PLAYLIST Long-haul containers	MIXTAPE Adaptive Leadership	MIXTAPE Beautiful Questions	MIXTAPE Poetry of Creating in Complexity					
What's due																	
	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Hosting	December 18 Final Gift
								Culture notes	Notes and intention	Session arc	Session guide	Revised guide					

Expectations

Track	What's involved	When	How much time?	Expectation
Before each class	Readings, audio and video, discussed each week in class	Weekly	About one hour per week	<p>We curate these carefully—they are important to your learning. So please:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with these every week, because we will be working with this material in the live session. Make notes in your learning journal, which will help you learn, give you something to refer to during the live session, and greatly help you when it comes time to write reflection papers.
Class sessions	Weekly gatherings on Zoom or in person. Expect to encounter new perspectives and invitations to listen and speak openly	Every Tuesday at 6pm	Zoom sessions are 2½ hours, in-person workshops are 5-7 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend every session. If something comes up and you just can't make it, please let us know if you can. Be on time, wear comfortable clothes Bring who you are and your notes from the readings.
Personal and group practices	Assignment to practice a personal, relational or group skill	Many weeks, but not every week. Due dates given with assignments	About one hour per week	Complete all aspects of the assignment by the due date. Individual practices sometimes ask that you take a few minutes each day to repeat an activity. Other practices ask you to find time with a colleague or your team. Please engage as openly as you can, and let us know if you feel stuck!
Weekly reflections	Short personal writings in a Google Doc, reflecting on class materials, activities, and experience with practices	Every week	30-60 minutes per week	This is writing to understand, express, and synthesize, not writing to repeat or "get it right." Please use this to practice a weekly ritual of being in personal conversation with the course material.
Group project	An extended group project, organized as a series of short assignments and culminating in a hosted dialogue session	Weekly during second half of the course, and in the final class session	Estimate of one to two hours weekly during last five weeks	Group archive effectively shares the team's process and results. Final reflection passes key learnings on to the community of practice.
Final Gift	Create an artifact or piece of media that gives your learning to others.	Semester end	Varies with your creative choices. Estimate: six to twelve hours	We will shape the specifics of this assignment in conversation with the class. The goal is to share a most-meaningful aspect of your learning with others.

Expectations and grading

Grading

Final grades are based on four aspects of class participation.

Citizenship and participation in class	25%
Weekly short reflections	25%
Final gift	25%
Group hosting project	25%

Citizenship and participation in class

Do come to class. Please communicate with us if you can't make a class.

We expect you to be kind and honest to yourself, us and each other.

Communicate. If you're confused or lost, feel overwhelmed, if you need help, if what we ask of you is not in line with your beliefs, if something isn't working out, if our culture is clashing with your culture,... whatever it is, if you tell us, we'll be glad you said it and will do our best to helpfully respond or adjust.

Engage with openness and honesty. This course asks you to learn unfamiliar approaches. Some may contradict your previous training. Some ideas may seem abstract or impractical at first. And some assignments may require you to try things that make you feel uncomfortable.

We ask that you...

Be open to learning	Dare to try
Communicate honestly	Pay attention, listen, and explore the material

Take care of yourself

Some of this work can be emotionally difficult. When you notice that you cannot be present, take care—practice coming back to the moment, or let us know you need to step away. You always have permission to opt out of any activity. Also, SVA offers free mental health services. We encourage you to lean on this offering: sva.edu/students/life-at-sva/health-and-safety/health-counseling.

Weekly reflections

Each week you will write a two-page reflection that touches on that week's readings, class activities, and practice assignments. We will provide each student with a private document on Google Drive for these reflections.

What we expect

Weekly reflections are due each Monday night. We will provide detailed instructions and expectations for this assignment. Briefly, we look for students to express their intellectual and emotional engagement with each week's materials. The request is not for "academic writing," but for documentation of personal learning. We will evaluate these essays on completeness and depth of engagement.

Final gift

At the end of the semester, students will create an artifact or piece of media that gives your learning to others. We hope to share this publicly, as a gift to our peers in the community of change leadership. We will shape the specifics of this assignment in conversation with the class. The goal is to share a most-meaningful aspect of your learning with others.

What we expect

The final gift is due no later than the evening of December 18. We will provide detailed instructions and evaluation criteria for this assignment.

Group hosting project—Hosting Day

One series of assignments builds throughout the semester to culminate in "Hosting Day." Students will work in small teams through a process guided by the instructors: forming a conversational intention, choosing a core method, drafting and refining a facilitation guide, and hosting group dialogue. This set of conversations will take place in an event we call Hosting Day. Teams then package their materials and document results in a final archive.

What we expect

Good team citizenship and collaboration, fulfill the requirements detailed in the assignment, communicate with your professors through the process to review your decisions, plans and designs, contribute to the quality and clarity of the group presentation and final team report.

Course materials

Each session we will assign readings from books, websites, and journals, as well as audio and video of talks and presentations. A full set of these required readings as well as a list of additional suggested texts will be posted on Canvas. No books are required to purchase or read entirely, but there are several that we recommend as useful additions to a student's collection.

If you'd like to see a list of books from which the instructors are drawing material, and can't wait for the whole list to grow in Canvas, see the collection of course-related books on goodreads.com:

www.goodreads.com/review/list/18901077-fit-associates?shelf=sva-dsi-fundamentals-course

Recommended books

Community: the Structure of Belonging, Peter Block.

Holding Change, adrienne maree brown

Emergent Strategy, adrienne maree brown

Systemic Action Research, Danny Burns.

The Politics of Trauma, Staci K. Haines.

Finding Refuge: Heart work for healing collective grief, michelle cassandra johnson.

Collaborating with the enemy, Adam Kahane.

Power and Love, Adam Kahane.

Facilitating Participatory Decision-Making, Sam Kaner

More Time to Think, Nancy Kline

Confluence, Cynthia Kurtz

My Grandmother's Hands, Resmaa Menakem

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life, Marshall Rosenberg.

The Connected Community, Cormac Russell.

Rekindling democracy: a professional's guide to working in citizen space, Cormac Russell.

Presence-Based Leadership, Doug Silsbee.

Designing Regenerative Cultures, Daniel Christian Wahl.

The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America, David Whyte

Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love and Liberation, Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, Jasmine Syedullah, PhD

Your professors



Marc Rettig

Marc Rettig's work is defined by a question: "How can we better learn to create together over the long term to increase sustainability, equity, and belonging?" He pursues answers to that question through consulting, teaching, and writing.

As a principal of Fit Associates, Marc helps mission-led leaders and teams develop capacity to create in and with social complexity. Fit has done this work with large corporations, local food systems, through business futures explorations, and in the trenches of organizational politics and processes.

Teaching both in the MFA in Design for Social Innovation program at The School of Visual Arts in New York and the Carnegie Mellon University School of Design provides a learning lab and proving ground for Marc's work.

After a first career in software systems, Marc spent over twenty years as a designer of projects, interactions, products, services, experiences, and transformations. He has worked with corporations across a broad range of sectors, including Philips, Nissan, Microsoft, Comcast, Whirlpool, KitchenAid, Seagate, SAP, and numerous startup companies.

Marc's most recent venture is in its first early days. You can learn about it by visiting okaythen.net.



Mickey Ferrara

Mickey is a community organizer, design doula and educator based in Brooklyn, NY. She is the co-founder of The Rebellious Root Collective, a facilitation cooperative focused on supporting organizations explore and root in anti-oppressive practices and the co-founder of The Homegirl Box, a lifestyle brand that uses political education as a tool to celebrate the lives of visionary women.

She believes that every day we are practicing the world we want to create with each other through our practices, rituals and embodiment - and these new worlds come to life through our collective work and radical imagination.

She graduated from SVA's Design for Social Innovation Program in May 2023 and has been working as the Creative Director at Elephant Circle, a birth justice organization using design to create a circle of support for all birthing people and families, across the entire perinatal period.

You can catch Mickey in Brooklyn rocking high tops and big earrings.



We recognize, honor, and express huge gratitude for Hanna du Plessis. Hanna co-taught this course for eleven years. Her way of seeing, voice, love for students, and clear sense that a world of belonging for all is possible has profoundly shaped everything we will do together in 2023.

[The] future is not just about firefighting and tinkering with the surface of structural change. It's not just about replacing one mindset that no longer serves us with another. It's a future that requires us to tap into a deeper level of our humanity, of who we really are and who we want to be as a society. It is a future that we can sense, feel, and actualize by shifting the inner place from which we operate. It is a future that in those moments of disruption begins to presence itself through us. **This inner shift, from fighting the old to sensing and presencing an emerging future possibility, is at the core of all deep leadership work today.** It's a shift that requires us to expand our thinking from the head to the heart. It is a shift from an ego-system awareness that cares about the well-being of oneself to an eco-system awareness that cares about the well-being of all, including oneself.

Otto Scharmer

Healing begins where the wound was made

Alice Walker

Connection is why we're here. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. This is what it's all about. It doesn't matter whether you talk to people who work in social justice and mental health and abuse and neglect, what we know is that connection, the ability to feel connected, is—neurobiologically that's how we're wired—it's why we're here.

Brené Brown

Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free — he has set himself free — for higher dreams, for greater privileges.

James Baldwin

In order to create a world that works for more people, for more life, we have to collaborate on the process of dreaming and visioning and implementing that world. ...**The more people who co-create the future, the more people whose concerns will be addressed from the foundational level in this world.**"

adrienne maree brown

...In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus on that. Do not make yourself ill with overwhelm. There is a tendency too to fall into being weakened by perseverating on what is outside your reach, by what cannot yet be. Do not focus there. That is spending the wind without raising the sails. We are needed, that is all we can know.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes

The alchemists maintained that we can create only in our own image.

That is, everything takes form according to the consciousness that shaped it. If our self-image is small and restricted, or cold and inert, then what we produce will most probably be stillborn, like its maker. It is essential, then, to know what is vital and alive inside us and shape our lives in its image. With a leaden appreciation of ourselves, everything we make takes on that dull weight. To create the golden moment, we must know where the gold lies in ourselves, but we must not have narrow, tidy images of what makes up our "gold." Without the fiery embrace of everything from which we demand immunity, including depression and failure, the personality continues to seek power over life rather than power through the experience of life. We throw the precious metal of our own experience away, exchanging it for the fool's gold of a superimposed image, an image of what our experience should be rather than what it actually is, the final element in the act of creation.

David Whyte

**Not everything that is faced can be changed;
but nothing can be changed until it is faced**

James Baldwin



Always we hope
Someone else has the answer.
Some other place will be better,
Some other time it will all turn out...

At the center of your being
You have the answer,
You know who you are
And you know what you want.

There is no need
To run outside
For better seeing.

Nor to peer from a window.

Rather abide at the center of your being;
For the more you leave it, the less you learn.

Search your heart
And see
The way to do
Is to be.

Lao Tzu

Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's
hot in the summer and cold in the
winter. It's round and wet and crowded.
At the outside, babies, you've got
about a hundred years here.

There's only one rule I know of, babies:
God damn it, you've got to be kind.

Kurt Vonnegut