

Regarding relations

How to organize in relation with everything

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Abstract

Big history opens up a wealth that we can use to develop the ability to handle issues. But with everything at hand, how do we actually shape our practice in relationship with everything there is? This paper approaches “relating” as an organizational issue and proposes to utilize the network as both an ordering principle and a unit of analysis. In this network approach for organizing an actor investigates and builds up relationships from four different parts: the relationship with what we are, what we know, what we want and what we can. The pattern that connects is like a dance of interacting parts (Bateson, 1979). This paper describes these four parts in succession, each part with its own starting point and design strategy.

Introduction

Big History shows us that we, as human beings, are part of an enormous wealth. The trick is not to leave this wealth behind us as past history, but to be in contact with it, to invest in it, to use it and to take it with us into our future. This is not only an ambition, but also a necessity, as exemplified by hot topics such as durability issues. We can use the wealth provided by Big History to develop the ability to handle issues, but how do we shape the relationship with everything there is? In this paper we approach “in relation with” as an organizational issue and propose to utilize the network both as an ordering principle and a unit of analysis. As human beings we are the link between what we do and everything there is and it is our own art how to, as networks ourselves, organize the relationship. The assumption is that we still have a lot to learn when it comes to organizing the relationship, as evidenced by current practice and the complex issues that emerge from it. If this assumption is valid, then the question arises why we humans should not as a child already learn to organize our lives, our learning and our work in relationship to everything there is. This question not only touches upon tapping into the inspirational knowledge of our Big History, but even more upon the importance of the art of organizing itself. Organizing is a commonplace issue that returns in every context and in everything we do. How can we organize what we are, what we know, what we want and what we can while maintaining our relationship with everything there is? The answer is, in essence, that we constantly build afresh our relationship with everything.

The organizational pattern

This paper introduces an organizational pattern (figure 1) that we, as organizing human beings in relationship with everything there is, can make explicit, can consciously use and repeat, and can pass on to next generations. With this pattern we unravel the act of organizing in different parts related to what we are, what we know, what we want and what we can. The parts come together in what we do. This organizational pattern is, to use the words of Bateson (1979), like a dance of interacting parts.

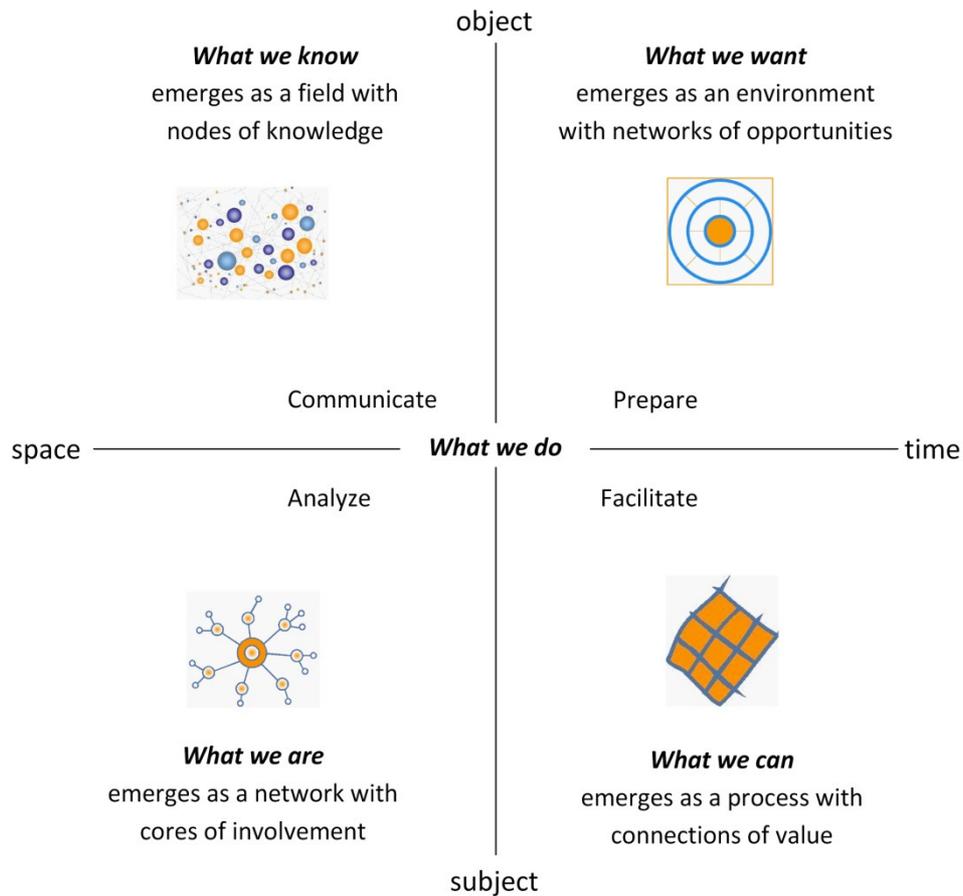


Figure 1: organizational pattern

The parts interact with each other, but each part implies its own design in relationship with everything:

- *What we are* appears as a network with cores of involvement. We organize by analyzing.
- *What we know* appears as a field with nodes of knowledge. We organize by communicating.
- *What we want* appears as an environment with networks of opportunities. We organize by preparing.
- *What we can* appears as a process with connections of value. We organize by facilitating.

What we do appears as an organizational pattern. We will repeat this organizational pattern as a whole at every scale and develop the ability to handle unexpected issues. Relationships with everything are infinitely and the challenge is always how far we can get in making relationships. Building a new organization starts with organizing what we are and with the network that appears we organize what we know, what we want and what we can.

Design Strategies

We have four different design strategies (figure 2) that together make up the organizational pattern in our daily practice.

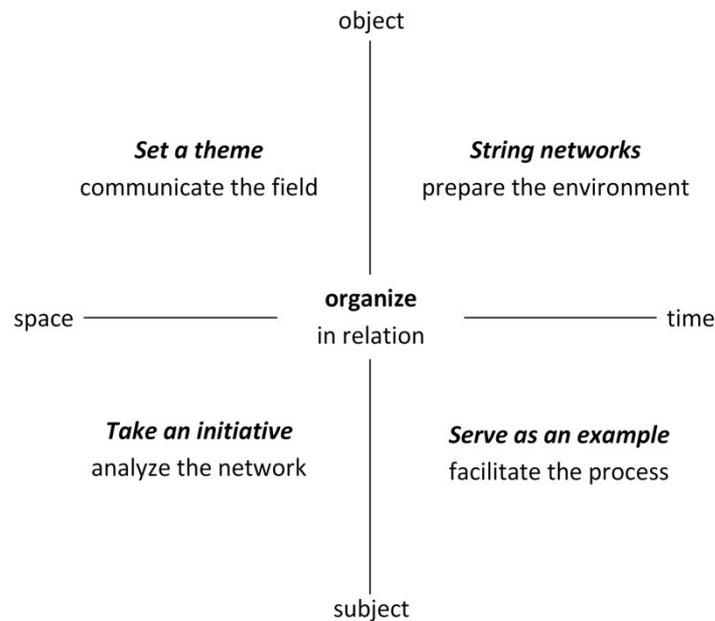


Figure 2: design strategies for organization

We build a dynamic organization that responds to current events and develops in relationship with everything there is. We *take initiatives* and analyze current networks of involvement that are in relationship with everything there is. We *set a theme* and communicate it in a field of nodes from which we can draw and to which we can contribute. We *string networks* and agree on what we want. We *serve as an example* and encourage ourselves to develop what we can. The challenge is, how far can we get from a given starting point and in a certain time.

Elements of relationships

Starting from the daily practice and by using a number of design strategies we organize the relationship with all there is. Distinctive elements of this relationship are subject, object, space and time. These elements all take their identity from different sources: “subject” from the human as observer, “object” from everything there is and that demands attention, “space” from positions, and “time” from connections. In their combinations they all create relationships that have their own causes. The relationship between subject and space builds up through a core and emerges as network of involvement. We trigger this relationship when we *take an initiative*. The relationship between object and space builds up through the node and emerges as field. We trigger this relationship when we *set a theme*. The relationship between object and time builds up through the network and emerges as environment. We trigger this relationship when we *string networks*. The relationship between subject and time builds up through the connection and emerges as process. We trigger this relationship when we *serve as an example*. There is no direct relationship between subject and object. This relationship is always mediated by and expressed in space and time. Similarly, there is no direct relationship between space and time. Subject and object always mediate this relationship.

By organizing the relations between subject, object, space and time from the initiatives, themes, strings of networks and examples as starting points, a joint movement is set in motion and organization emerges with the network of involvement, the field, the environment and the process. In this paper I describe these four parts in succession, each part with its own starting point and design strategy.

Take an initiative and analyze involvement

First starting point for *organizing in relationship with everything*, is to “take an initiative” and to analyze the involvement that the initiative attracts. The network emerges when we use the initiative to organize the relationship with everything that is involved. In line with the actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) we assume that every person is part of and acts in networks. These networks are not only made up of persons but also include ideas, persons, resources, thoughts, sources, materials, software, etc. We focus on the person in relationship with everything there is, we consider i.e. the network as a unit of analysis. The network emerges together with the initiative at its core and through analyzing it, the network comes into view and we are able to consciously act as a network. Whenever the situation becomes complex, we return to the core and re-organize the network, thereby renewing the relationship with everything that is involved. Should we let go of the initiative as core, then the network of involvement dissolves itself. A new network of involvement is formed around a new initiative as core.

Design strategy for organizing: network analysis for initiators

Network analysis (figure 3) is a design strategy for organizing that we can use to explore and build networks. We make use of the analysis to order the involvement that surrounds an initiative and to highlight positions of involvement in a network. The network emerges through the analysis. We kick off the network analysis by determining the initiative at the core of the network and brainstorming on everything that is involved (ingredients). Subsequently we place these ingredients in a wide circle around the initiative, search for links between the initiative and everything that is involved. Finally we distinguish between different positions that persons can take up in the network.



Figure 3: Network analysis for initiators

The network analysis distinguishes between five positions of involvement in the network. These concern actual positions of involvement and not expected positions or formal functions.

1. The initiator takes the lead, often starts alone and investigates involvement.
2. Partners put their weight behind the initiative, serve by example, carry it out and accept the consequences.
3. Links establish connections, are ambassadors and provide access to resources.
4. Suppliers contribute their specialism, resources and materials.
5. Users utilize the network to find answers to questions and as a base for their actions.

We can also use the network analysis to stimulate thinking in terms of network ordering. A large piece of paper and a pen will suffice for an individual doing a network analysis. With tablecloths and marker pens we can perform a network analysis with a whole group.

The network analysis is a snapshot of a vibrant and dynamic network in which everything that is involved is continuously re-organizing itself and positions of involvement can shift. Persons can shift position because their involvement changes. Involvement starts with the initiative and positions which in themselves are independent from formal functions. You can challenge and invite persons to take up another position. Persons can also take up more than one position. Some involved persons evolve into participants or links, but involvement can also fade away. The challenge is to maintain an overview of who is acting from which position. This makes clear which steps are required to reach the core.

Set the theme and communicate knowledge

Second starting point for *organizing in relationship with everything*, is to “set a theme” and communicate knowledge. This is about starting as wide a conversation as possible around a theme, and to connect to everything that is involved. Setting a theme encourages further investigation. We create space for different initiatives and examples, invite everyone and everything to become a node, to set up relationships with other nodes and to provide access to knowledge. This is also called a nodal network (Castells, 2000). A nodal network does not have one single core, but is a whole made up of nodes. Getting to know a node starts with establishing contact, opening conversation and investigating what is. Through communication the nodes come into view. We use different media, such as internet, to bring the nodal network into view and to organize access to knowledge.

Design strategy for organizing: theme communication

Theme communication (figure 4) is a design strategy for organizing a field with nodes to communicate the knowledge of themes. Theme communication provides an overview of communication nodes and an initial ordering of what we know about the theme. Theme communication starts by giving a name to the theme and writing the first story. We collect examples, initiatives, ideas and activities, quotes and remarks. We also carry out a short network analysis and sketch out an initial time line. The theme communication brings the (knowledge) field into view and we identify nodes to add depth to the theme.

<p>Theme name Brainstorm with a few words and expressions to find an attention grabbing name</p>	<p>Story When you bump into someone what do you tell them about your theme? What's your story?</p>	<p>Initiatives Which concrete initiatives exist that you can connect to? Which concrete leads are you going to take by yourself?</p>
<p>Remarks/quotes What is being said about your theme? How do people respond when you tell them about your theme?</p>	<p>Ideas, activities and examples Which ideas arise? What are all the actions you can take? What's already taking place? Which examples?</p>	<p>Network Who are you going to start building the network with and who are you going to involve with a network analysis?</p> 
<p>Timeline Make a timeline starting at the beginning of your theme and ending with the manifestation that rounds off the theme. Which period do you devote to your theme? Which meeting occasions do you organize as steps along the way? How do you prepare the meeting occasions? Who do you bring together?</p> 		

Figure 4: theme communication

We invite everyone to consciously and explicitly become a node, to make personal knowledge of the theme available to others, to be curious and to connect with other nodes. We make use of a diversity of media such as newspapers, television and radio, newsletters, posters, web communication and exhibitions to make knowledge and nodes visible. The challenge is for each participant to find their own path in their own way. By entering into an open conversation the theme will invite attention. In particular we will enter into conversations with persons we just happen to meet. Everyone we meet is also a node. The challenge is to turn the theme into the talk of the day. The theme is part of everything we do and we link it to every situation we encounter. We also make sure that conversations get up to speed from different angles and we look for persons who represent an angle that has remained out of sight. Starting point is that everyone matters. We can also stimulate the conversation by collecting quotes and anecdotes, carrying out interviews and then communicating our outcomes.

String networks and prepare opportunities

The third starting point for *organizing in relationship with everything*, is to “string networks” and prepare opportunities from different angles. Central to this enabling environment are the users. We prepare opportunities and anticipate questions from users. Our opportunities can be triggered by the users or by our personal ambitions to contribute. The challenge is to make ourselves redundant by means of our current opportunities, and to prepare new contributions in relationship with everything in line with the user. This leads to ongoing dynamics between external contributions and the ability of the users from within. The challenge is to develop the abilities of the users and at the same time keep attuning the external contributions. Holding on to the environment formed can condense or freeze up

the relationship such that there is no more space available for new questions. The ability to use the environment disappears and a complex problem emerges. Then the time has come to let go of the contribution and to develop in relationship with everything there is, a new environment or to enter into fresh conversations on a theme.

Design strategy for organizing: enabling environment

Enabling environment (figure 5) is a design strategy to organize the environment for the users. The design consists of several circles. We connect to the circles of the users, such as their own networks, the social environment and specific facilities. We prepare the opportunities in relationship with everything and from different angles. The strategy shows how the ability of the users and the opportunities we prepare come together from different angles and we take care of the contact with the users by, for example, sharing a topical theme or meeting place.

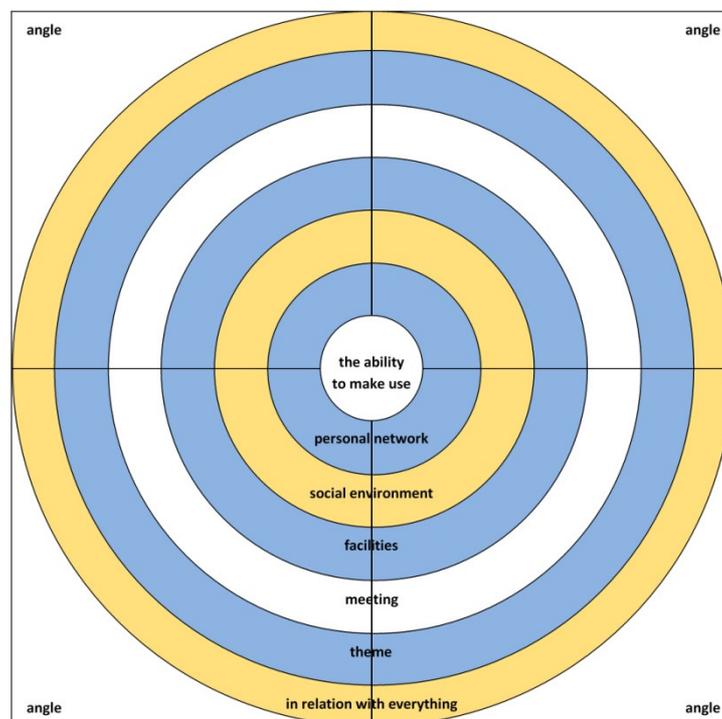


Figure 5: enabling environment

Preparing the opportunities and the emergence of an environment is consistent with the concept of “prepared environment”, one of the most important principles from Montessori (1949). Montessori regards all teacher activities as preparation. The teacher prepares for the “help me to do it myself” question of the learner. The teacher tunes in to the learner and allows the learner to pursue his/her own path. Montessori describes a schoolteacher as someone who first prepares and then assumes the position of observer filled with curiosity and respect for phenomena. When the environment is prepared then the learner, as user, can proceed along his/her own path. Should the learner not live up to the expectations of the teacher, rather than saying to the learner that s/he did not do well, the teacher is to prepare him/herself again.

Serve as an example and facilitate value

The fourth starting point for *organizing in relationship with everything*, is to “serve as an example” and facilitate value. To serve as an example means putting into practice the art of organizing in relationship with everything. By studying existing examples, making examples visible and serving as an example, we become more conscious of and familiar with the value. This way we stimulate that organizing in relationship with everything there is becomes second nature and routine, that we see it in everything around us, that we become aware of patterns and that more and more people support it. The challenge of organizing is that every relationship gains value with its connections with all there is. This requires that we are able to take a fresh look at things and start all over again, that our starting point is always current practice and that from there we establish new connections with everything there is.

Design strategy for organizing: network program

A network program (figure 6) is a design strategy to organize one’s own actual practice in relationship with everything. A network program starts by establishing an actual theme and ends with a manifestation moment, when all the relationships developed during the course of the program are unveiled. Throughout the program the conversation around the theme is organized, networks are explored, initiatives and examples are made visible and exchanged and new initiatives are stimulated. During the manifestation everything that has been developed throughout the network program is presented.

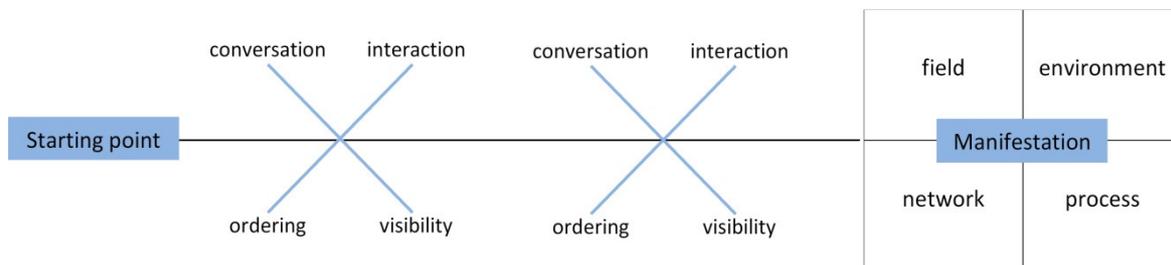


Figure 6: network program

A period is set for each network program and meeting moments are used to set out a program line. Meeting moments are also combined with events that are already taking place, whereby the theme becomes more and more connected with actual practice. During meeting moments a diversity of media is used to expose how the theme is evolving and those involved from different angles are brought into contact with each other. Everything of value comes together in the final manifestation.

A network program represents togetherness and is consistent with the ambition to organize in relationship with everything. The potential for organizing in relationship with everything has no boundaries. Yet, there is a deadline for a network program. A network program is always temporary to ensure that interest in and involvement with a theme stay vivid. Rounding off creates space to start afresh. It helps to establish a new topical theme or to sharpen the current theme and to give it a new name. By starting afresh we re-organize the network, rekindle involvement and invite to a new conversation.

Every person has, explicitly or implicitly, a diversity of programs to organize his/her life, work or learning. The challenge is to make the programs explicit and to consciously organize them. An extra challenge is, to do this in relationship with everything there is. When we take up this challenge successfully we can contribute to our ability to handle issues and to make us aware of the wells we draw from.

How to organize in relation with everything there is?

In this paper we have described an organizational pattern that can help us organize the relationship with everything there is. To organize in relation with everything there is, is in essence rather a challenge than a goal as there is no limit to the relationships we can establish. Starting points help us to order, to position, to connect and to appear. We explore and build relationships from specific starting points that, in turn, mutually interact and constantly develop. Our challenge is *how far can we go with inquisitively building relationships?*

To organize from starting points onwards can help us to remain free from complexity problems. Complexity is a form, not a starting point for organization. We do not start from a form, but explore and build relationships to get to a form. The design strategies that belong to the organizational pattern presented here demonstrate how we constantly build the relations and let the forms appear. If we return to the core, then the first form to appear is the network. Via the nodes of the network we gain access to a plethora of knowledge. By using our networks to create an environment we align everything and come to our programs.

It is a special trait of us humans that we can organize our relations consciously. For instance, we can take an initiative and organize our own lives, learning and work. We can also create an inviting space and enable others to take initiatives. We can analyze and see what is out there. We can communicate and listen to what the relationships themselves tell us or read into them as we make contact. We can prepare the opportunities we want to put together and facilitate that what ultimately gives us the ability to handle issues and see repeating patterns.

With this organizational pattern we have unraveled the act of organizing and put it in relation with everything there is. The challenge is to further explore the full potential of organizing in relation with everything, to make it a routine and to pass it on to the next generations.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Currently Anne-Marie Poorthuis works with schools, organizations and municipalities. She facilitates network programs for organizing the conversation, building the networks and preparing the environment around important themes of society. She developed several concepts and instruments, such as a network analysis of involvement, a network program for organization and society building, a network strategy for municipality and the networked learning school. Anne-Marie also prepares a PhD thesis on organizing with the network as an ordering principle.

Anne-Marie Poorthuis is the partner of Jos Werkhoven, a member of the IBHA and author of the paper: *Once upon a time.....there was a story to be told....*

Some publications

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