

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Moving from Spectator to Participant

Posted by [Debbie Cook](#) on July 4, 2010 - 10:40am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

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If an outsider were to pull back the covers and show people what is going on, what would be said of The Oil Drum and its contribution to society? How is the content perceived by others? Has the effort led to a better understanding of issues, to new government policies, to strengthened communities, to resilience, to better relationships, to creativity? Are we achieving our goals?



The answer, of course is, it depends...on the way you think.

I'm a learning junky. I attend dozens of conferences each year on a variety of subjects. The most

recent was a seminar on [Thinking about Thinking](#), and it has certainly gotten me thinking.

I've been thinking about this website and its future. I've been thinking about what would make The Oil Drum more sustainable. I've been thinking about what unites us and what divides us and whether an awareness of the way we think could lead us in a better direction.

If we are aware of the kind of thinking we are applying in our discourse, it might lead to different or better answers. For example, consider the continuum thinking involved in sorting. We sort everything: fruit, utensils, cans on a shelf, partners, toys, cars, music, art. We stand in front of a pile of perfect bananas and sort for color, defects, the slightest imperfections. Humans also categorize: black/white, democrat/republican, us/them, capitalist/socialist. Categorizing is absolutist. It helps us quickly choose between a bear and a deer.

We rarely ask under what conditions or in what context one type of thinking is more appropriate than another. The drilling ban is a good example of category thinking. Applying category thinking, we either place it in the good column or the bad column. Continuum thinking, on the other hand, might ask, "Under what conditions should drilling be permitted or banned." This kind of question opens up opportunities for thoughtful dialogue and consideration of complex problems. It places the issue into the context of the system in which it operates.

Which takes us to another kind of thinking--systems thinking. [Dr. Russell Ackoff](#) does a superb job of explaining the difference between analyzing (understanding the parts of an object) and synthesizing (understanding an object in the context of the system in which it operates). As he points out, you cannot explain why a nation drives on a particular side of the road by studying the parts of a car. You have to understand the system in which the car operates. Systems thinking reveals the world to be a pattern of interdependent relationships. While Oil Drum regulars are very familiar with systems thinking in terms of energy issues, how would we apply it in terms of the organization, and the relationships with its readers and contributors? Are we creating an environment that values participation or turns participants away?

The last kind of thinking I want to mention is that of spectators and participants. Spectators know the data, understand the theories, listen and take notes. They sit in the back of the room with their arms crossed looking for cracks in every foundation. Participants are those putting their knowledge and understanding (whether flawed or not) into action. They are the risk takers, experimenters, entrepreneurs, who have moved from spectator to participant. Spectators may seek reformation but they never have to accept blame because they are a spectator. Participants are seeking transformation and by virtue of participating in problem solving are often the recipient of blame. It is evidenced in innumerable comment threads here and particularly in our politics. Would a better understanding of our style of thinking move people from spectator to participant?

The point of this missive is not to say that one type of thinking is better than another. Instead, the point is that it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the way we think, and the impacts that our way of thinking has on achieving our goals, on minimizing our losses, and on developing creativity.

Until this moment, I had not read the goals of The Oil Drum. They are:

- Raise awareness
- Host a civil discussion

Conduct original research
Create a global community

I am now thinking we could be so much more effective if we spent more time thinking about our thinking. What do you think?



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