



Reflection on the sustainability and multilevel antifragility workshop held by the WSB University in Wrocław

Author: David N. Berger

Abstract

Aim: The aim of this article is to provide a brief reflection on the campus sustainability workshop that was held on May 13th, 2016 at the WSB University in Wrocław. The topic of sustainability, and identifying critical threats to sustainability at the institutional level and beyond is of major concern.

Design / Research methods: This reflection relies on a critical review of the discussion and materials presented during the workshop, and the opinion of the author. The observation and participation of the author and fellow participants played a crucial role in shaping the reflection.

Conclusions / findings: Firstly, the conclusion drawn is that the methodology used by the host should be more clearly specified, and the questions should be focused and separated, in order to properly research them. Secondly, given the data that was available, that the study of fragilization in this context should focus on Safe to Fail, instead of Fail Safe approaches, to prevent catastrophic failure events.

Originality / value of the article: The value of this reflection lies in the primary research interest, however, institutions may benefit from the analysis and opinions suggested. Without properly redesigning the study methodology to be more specific, the value of this research in its current form is limited, this author looks forward to the future work on the topic.

Keywords: campus sustainability, sustainability management, fragility, anti-fragility, methodology

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Introduction and general reflection

This reflection is prepared as a response to the workshop held on the 13th of May, 2016 at the Wrocław

School of Business, in Wrocław, Poland. The purpose of this reflection is to address concerns, questions, and thoughts raised during the workshop, and to further the discussion regarding Campus Sustainability.

David N. Berger
University of Leipzig, Wrocław, and Roskilde
David.berger@asu.edu

The conference's primary aim was to conduct an explorative workshop, drawing together a variety of experiences from international and domestic scholars. The participants were from universities, and organizations across four different continents, and their vastly different experiences and roles in academia served to provide a "melting pot" which could help to identify commonalities. The scholars ranged from graduate students, to tenured professors. These scholars were asked to collaborate and develop a series of opinions regarding universities role in promoting and implementing sustainable practices.

The nature of the workshop gave a general introduction, and then progressed to an individual ranking of normative statements, culminating in a focusing in on research methods, categorization of these statements, and a clarification of the research aim. The specific aims of the conference were to develop and rank indicators that would help to assess universities fragility and the impact of that fragility on society. Further, the group sought to create indicators that would allow the vast variety of institutions comparable. By doing so, the conference aimed to identify for correction factors which affected the fragility of both the university and its external environment.

This focus on understanding the relationship between the universities and their external environment built upon an idea identified in the theoretical background provided before the workshop. Those ideas regarding weaknesses and irreversible loss were of particular importance because the workshop worked to understand the profoundly complex and tightly knit systems that allow universities to exist, function, and operate. When contextualized in the external environment, it became clear that the danger of fragilities and bottlenecks might lead to a chain of effects with unpredictable,

irreversible and non-linear damage due to the strong interconnectedness (Perrow 1999, Hardford 2011, Taleb 2012).

In order to understand these complexities, participants were primed with the following issues for consideration: "The university [...] is a complex system. However, it is not such a tightly knit system, that a break down somewhere in the organization will quickly lead to collapse. In this context, fragilities need to be identified that threaten the functioning of the university, but maybe more important, activities that fragilize the external environment, and/or negatively influence local sustainable development [must be identified]¹. In particular indicators should be developed where sustainability can be improved by elimination instead of undertaking action (Platje 2016)."

The focus on elimination of problem areas, and reduction is an expansion of the ideals raised in Degrowth² (D'Alisa et al 2014). The primary researcher (Platje 2016) used pre-workshop questionnaires to develop the indicators which might broadly represent these fragilities.

Using a theoretical background, combined with the pre-questionnaires the workshop commenced with a second immediate questionnaire which allowed the participants to grade or rate their agreement in relation to their "home" university. The participants then assessed whether the indicators may or may not be relevant to identifying fragilities given their current

¹ Clarification added by author

² Degrowth is a political, economic, and social movement which advocates for the downscaling of production and consumption. Degrowth has a strongly post materialistic ideational structure, which seeks to maximize quality of life, happiness and well-being through non-consumptive means—sharing work, consuming less, while devoting more time to art, music, family, culture and community (D'Alisa et al. 2014).

state of knowledge. Next, the participants were broken into teams, which allowed them to consult each other, and create a consensus on the nature of the indicators, their seriousness³, and their impact on sustainability. Following the earlier methodology, the focus was on the elimination of threats and major issues, in order to allow for opportunities and survival of the organization. The direction was to determine what could be eliminated in order to improve the viability and sustainability of both systems. As can be imagined this was a subjective and difficult task. Agreement was reached, however there was not absolute consensus, a case could be made for each point. The focus group of this author decided to identify those issues which resonated most strongly, despite this lack of consensus.

The third session led to an open discussion among all focus groups to share their results, and to compare methodologies and considerations. A thoughtful reflection ensued which brought about a new organizational and methodological paradigm. Separating the indicators into categories, and then suggesting that the research focus on each category specifically, and adjust its methodology to match that specific context. This allowed for the indicators to be contextualized, and to be given a more balanced and fair consideration. However, the strong interconnectivity of many indicators, and the general subjective nature of those indicators led to a variety of co-variables, which made the isolation and individual consideration of each indicator extremely difficult. As a result, the focus groups proposed that the indicators be scrapped, and using the new organizational paradigm, new indicators be developed which could be more quantifiable and less subjective.

³ In terms of threats to the university or external system

Individual reflection

Given the focus group's responses, the author will present their personal opinion regarding the research. Overall, the workshop was intellectually stimulating, and the output of the various disciplines, hierarchical mixture of participants, and their individual experiences yielded information, feedback, and suggested new directions for the research. The provision of different methodological and theoretical ideational structures allowed for this author to analyze and interpret information in a new light.

The introduction of fragilities, and fragility assessment, particularly those that could threaten the survival and operation of the internal and external environment, provided a context in which simplification, elimination of extra or hazardous processes and identification of mistakes and toxic behaviors was an essential consideration. The ideal was to eliminate poor policies and processes that could result in extinction, or irreversible failure of the system. A top down approach is not capable of considering all of the variables, effects, or of truly understanding the processes themselves, as there is no perfect information, and as such is not useful in this context. In complex systems, information is flawed, processes to obtain data may be in place, but the capture, aggregation, and processing of that data is often incomplete, or not done at all. In this sense the truth of the issue remains difficult, if not impossible to ascertain. Additionally, the university and external environment are bound by social, cultural, political, and economic bond and as a result policy change and policy outcome are often obfuscated. The potential for negative externalities is high, and the whole impact often cannot be seen or measured until long after the policy has been implemented, and done its damage. "Good and bad" are subjective concepts. They are normative concepts

and although there is a bias towards identifying the bad, both remain extremely difficult to define in their entirety. The goal of this workshop was to ensure survival, not to gain a perfect system, and as a result, there were tolerances built into the methodology to deal with this imperfect and subjective information shortfall.

Given this opportunity to identify and address issues in this context, the goal of our consideration was to identify not the optimal or best solution, but to identify factors, which could be addressed via a grassroots or internal effort, which would ensure survival, and avoid failure.⁴ This author does not agree that it is only necessary to create a buffer, to ensure safeguards, but instead the ideal of safe to fail⁵ should be used when considering sustainability. This is closely related to the ideal that a system should survive, even if the individual components of it fail. In fact, it could be successfully argued that individual mortality is necessary for the health and viability of the system. Safe to fail mentality allows for individual components to fail, while preserving the core.

This mentality however is difficult to consider. That death and loss of individual components in a system is a positive plays into the idea of creative destruction. However, in practice it is often manipulated, or avoided. This author has often witnessed stories of individual failure used as cautionary tales to help ensure that individual components, regardless of their utility to the system, are preserved. This can have a profoundly negative impact,

⁴ Platje (2016) noted that, “It is not about choosing a second-best or optimal solution, but a least bad/evil or not the worst situation.”

⁵ In relation to “failsafe” which are designed to prevent failure – safe to fail systems are systems which are designed to manage a catastrophic and total failure, without creating massive externalities for the external environment.

as inefficient or dangerous individual components are preserved, and opportunity for catastrophic system failures multiply. This idea was further addressed in a critical review of top-down interventions in the theoretical background of the workshop. Platje (2016) noted that, “[..] top-down intervention often leads to “unexpected side effects” (Sterman 2000) where costs are often not considered as they are indirect, long-term, uncertain, non-linear and difficult to measure (Kahneman 2011, Taleb 2012, Platje 2011).” This blindness to the dangers of top down intervention, including the preservation of individual components when they may not be fit to survive is nothing short of reckless.

Given these factors, it is essential to take note of indicators that are relevant to the grassroots and middle status academics. Once identified they must be integrated with the top of the hierarchical structure, to create a stronger understanding of the issues at hand. Thus, the issues which should be addressed in an effort to preserve working structures, and identify structures that should be allowed to fail can be identified. This research workshop has begun that process thereby allowing for collaboration and feedback on indicator selection and assessment. Although there is much work to be done, it has correctly begun to seek out black swans which fragilize the system. As Platje references in the theoretical background for the workshop, he builds on the premise that Meadows (1998, 1999) and Sterman (2000) describe in their assessment of system theory. That feedback loops can create effects which will drag a system out of balance, and buffers, slack, and redundancy⁶ can prevent this, creating a sustainable model. Cutting out these backups may give moderate or low increase in efficiency, relying on other components of the

⁶ Safe to fail ideology

system to pick up the “slack”, but they then transfer risks to other components of the system, thus fragilizing it as a whole and creating an opportunity for a black swan to completely kill the system. In order to address these risks, Platje (2008, 2011) refers to the concept of institutional equilibrium in order to analyze and encourage critical thinking, exponential thinking, and management. These factors are essential in the authors opinion.

Stupidity management and conclusions

Given these reflections, the author turns to the final theoretical point of the workshop, which is to critically examine the situation as a whole utilizing stupidity management. “stupidity management [acts] as an indicator of organizations threatening sustainability (Alvesson, Spicer 2012).” The lack of “three aspects of cognitive capacity: reflectivity, justification and substantive reasoning” (Alvesson, Spicer 2012) leads to reduced viability of an organization⁷, increased fragilization and unsustainable behaviors which affect the external environment⁸. Given that final contextual piece, it is easier to develop a set of conclusions regarding the research.

Those conclusions are based upon the third session which led to an open discussion among all focus groups to share their results, and to compare

methodologies and considerations. The groups concluded that a new organizational and methodological paradigm was required, and that separating the indicators into categories, and then suggesting that the research focus on each category specifically, and adjust its methodology to match that specific context would be the best next step. Give this overarching structural change to the research, it would allow for the indicators to be contextualized, and to be given a more balanced and fair consideration. This consideration could then focus on the idea of Black Swans, and on the idea of stupidity management, but more than that, this focus would allow for a better selection of indicators, taking into account the strong interconnectivity of many indicators, and the general subjective nature of those indicators. A focus away from a subjective analysis and toward measurable indicators was advocated by the discussion groups. The author’s personal contribution is the focus on indicators that reduce fragilization by focusing on creating components that are safe to fail, instead of fail safe. These components within the system would operate effectively, but their failure would not throw the system out of balance, leading to catastrophic failure. Instead, they would allow components which no longer served their purpose to die out, strengthening the system as a whole, and maintaining its sustainability.

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⁷ Individual and systemic

⁸ Beyond the system and the individual to the whole environment

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Uwagi na temat zrównoważonego rozwoju i antykruchości wielopoziomowej na podstawie warsztatów w Wyższej Szkole Bankowej we Wrocławiu

Abstrakt

Cel: Celem artykułu jest zwięźle przedstawienie uwag, które pojawiły się podczas warsztatów na temat zrównoważonego rozwoju kampusu zorganizowanych 13 maja 2016 r. przez Wyższą Szkołę Bankową we Wrocławiu. Tekst dotyczy dwóch głównych problemów: zrównoważony rozwój i określenia krytycznych zagrożeń zrównoważonego rozwoju na poziomie instytucjonalnym i poza nim.

Metoda badawcza: Artykuł opiera się na krytycznym przeglądzie stanowisk prezentowanych podczas warsztatów, materiałów warsztatowych i własnej opinii autora. Na ostateczny kształt myśli wpłynęły obserwacje własne autora oraz innych uczestników warsztatów.

Wnioski: Po pierwsze, metodologię zastosowaną przez gospodarza warsztatów należy sformułować w sposób bardziej klarowny, pytaniom trzeba ukierunkować i potraktować je osobno, aby mogły stanowić przedmiot odpowiedniego badania. Po drugie – w kontekście badań nad kruchościami, zasada *Fail-Safe* [bezpieczeństwo od niepowodzenia], powinna mieć postać *Safe to Fail* [bezpieczne żeby mieć niepowodzenie], która pozwala przeciwdziałać sytuacjom katastroficznego niepowodzenia.

Oryginalność / wartość artykułu, wkład w rozwój nauki: O wartości tego tekstu stanowi głównie jego podstawowe zainteresowanie naukowe, lecz analiza i proponowane rozwiązania mogą zainteresować również instytucje i organizacje. W obecnej formie, przed uszczegółowieniem metodologicznym, wartość tekstu jest względnie ograniczona, a autor wyraża chęć kontynuacji badań z tego zakresu w przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój kampusu, zarządzanie zrównoważonego rozwoju, kruchość, antykruchosc, metodologia