



President's Message

Blooming and Buzzing Questions for a Confusing World

My institution, Parsons School of Design at The New School, will end our spring semester in about 2 weeks. Like in many parts of the Global North where many of our 340+ Cumulus members are based, this will be the conclusion of a full academic year that our students and faculty have experienced teaching and learning online.

After the forced experiment in higher education of remote teaching and learning we all experienced following the lockdowns of March 2020, it is safe to say the semester that ends for many of us has been quite different. As faculty, we had several months of practice. We worked hard to master the many pedagogical opportunities that online offers and find the silver lining for innovation that the new online environment has afforded us – from inviting colleagues from across the world to join our courses without the logistics of international travel, to new forms of collaboration and ideation via the many tools some of us have discovered: from Zoom break-out rooms to white board programs such as Mural and Miro.

My graduate seminar in the School of Design Strategies at Parsons focuses on design innovation and leadership. The online circumstances represented an opportunity for me to maximize different dimensions of student engagement and discussion via one of my favorite assignments in the course: the “in the news” segment. This exercise follows the “flip classroom” concept: every week, one student takes the lead to propose a topic connected to leadership or design innovation that one can find in recent news. It may be in a newspaper article, podcast, video, or blog post. The piece is shared before the class along with key discussion prompts that folks respond to in a discussion board online, then the following synchronous class session, that student leads a live discussion with a synthesis visual deck of the news piece and a reflection of its significance per the topics of our seminar. This semester, my students selected topics that are a concern to all of us as a global community of artists and designers; the breadth and scope of the questions we covered have been a deep source of personal inspiration. Connected to our stream of design innovation, questions touched upon decolonizing design and the pluriverse, biomimicry, design activism, creativity and improvisation, design and cryptocurrency, and design’s positioning vis-a-vis many of the new trends that will define a post-Covid global workforce and a future “new normal.” Intersecting with the leadership and organizational theme, we looked at wicked problems such as immigration and global trends of migration and food waste. We also got more personal: reflecting on career path journeys and empathic leadership traits and confronting head-on questions regarding our individual behaviors and accountability as global citizens with topics such as leadership gone wrong, emotional well-being in the workplace and at home, and the reckoning we are experiencing as we stand up and against a deeply polarized world of endless and disturbing discrimination and injustices of all kinds.

As I wrap up an incredibly energizing semester with this cohort of exceptional students, I am reminded of a wonderful quote by the organizational scholar Andrew Van de Ven about why we engage in processes of learning and inquiry: “Big research questions tend to reside in a blooming, buzzing and confusing world.”* The topics we covered in my seminar certainly attest to that confusion, but so does the moment in time we are in, still profoundly marked by the grip of the disruption and unsettling trauma of the pandemic. And yet, as advocates of the power of inquiry and imagination of our disciplines, we do know that from that confusing world, an invitation to ask positive questions that lead to breakthrough innovation and light is always there awaiting us, especially when we have the courage to persist.

This April newsletter edition captures the many buzzing questions our Cumulus community and students are answering through their participation in a number of exciting global competitions, through their connection to the New Bauhaus initiative and lastly via their contributions to the upcoming Cumulus Roma Design Culture (s) conference at Sapienza University.

Here’s to the positive power of inquiry in our midst. Be safe and all best wishes for those of you concluding the academic year!

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*Van de Ven (2006), *Knowledge for Theory and Practice*.