

It's the Circle of Life: Introducing Ecocycle Planning

Chloe Riley, Research Commons Librarian, Simon Fraser University Library

Canadian Library Assessment Workshop (CLAW), October 24, 2019

Licensed under Creative Commons: [CC-BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Title slide

Thank you for joining me here today. I'm happy to be here today and to talk to you about a technique or strategy called Ecocycle Planning. This technique can be especially useful to assess a portfolio of activities, such as the work of a project team, work unit, or other group of collaborators, in order to understand the work as a whole and to identify blockages or opportunities in work and workflows.

Land acknowledgement

I want to take a moment to acknowledge that the University of Windsor sits on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, which includes the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomie.

My institution of Simon Fraser University is located on the unceded, traditional, ancestral, and current territories of the x̱m̱əθkwəy̱əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumix̱w (Squamish), Səlílwətał (Tsleil-Waututh), ǫ́íćəy̱ (Katzie), ḵw̱iḵw̱əł̱əm (Kwikwetlem), and other Stó:lō Nations.

What are Liberating Structures?

Before I dive into Ecocycle Planning, I want to take a few moments to introduce Liberating Structures.

Liberating Structures are a series of 33 facilitation techniques developed by Keith McCandless & Henri Lipmanowicz. These techniques (or, as they call them, microstructures) can be used and adapted in numerous settings that involve groups of people working together, including meetings, classrooms, presentations, strategic planning sessions, team retreats and so on.

I have found them to be very adaptable, and they are easy to combine with one another or to add or drop rounds.

A number of Liberating Structures could be used or adapted for assessment or evaluation, and I'd be very interested to hear if anyone in the room is doing anything similar. Today, I'll be focusing on one Liberating Structure called Ecocycle Planning.

So what? (Why is this important?)

Conventional structures can be rigid and inhibiting. For example, a classroom where a lecturer or authority figure shares information with an audience of listeners. This is often reinforced by the space and its configuration (a lecturer on a stage or at a podium) and the expectations of the setting or event (mostly one-way information flow to an audience of listeners).

Other ways of engaging with groups can be disorganized or loose. Think, for example, of the open-ended question in a meeting: “So ... what do you all think?” Followed by the resounding silence -- or else that one person who always speaks up. These experiences can be frustrating or exclusionary.

Liberating Structures are designed to disrupt these stale or conventional structures of how we work in groups. They focus on inclusivity, giving everyone a voice, active participation and engagement. Many also encourage or facilitate opportunities for unleashing creativity or innovation, or what they refer to as “serious fun.”

Using a few key design elements, Liberating Structures can easily be put into practice or adapted: opening with a structuring invitation to set the expectations or intentions of the time together, outlining the space and materials needed, defining how participation is distributed (generally everyone participates in some format), how the groups are configured, and outlining the sequence of steps and timing.

All of this information as well as tips, pitfalls, and alternative options are available on the website: <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/> It’s often easier to get a sense of how it works if we just dive right in to putting it into practice.

Ecocycle Planning

Ecocycle Planning is one of the Liberating Structures facilitation techniques. Its general goal is to “analyze the full portfolio of activities and relationships to identify obstacles and opportunities for progress.”

This includes:

- Allow everyone to see where their activities fit in the larger context with others
 - You can see the forest and the trees
- Set priorities and plan actions
- Hear all perspectives (everyone gets a chance to participate and share their opinions/ideas/concerns)
- Identify blockages (of energy, of time, of other resources), and opportunities to free up resources
- Absorb disruption by assessing/reorganizing together

The suggested time on the website is to use 95 minutes to complete the activity. We obviously don’t have that amount of time today; moreover, to get a sense of how it works, we probably don’t need to do as deep a dive as we might if this was a topic we were wrestling with together as a group. So what we’re doing today is an adaptation.

Introducing the Ecocycle

The idea behind the Ecocycle is to map a portfolio of activities onto a lifecycle diagram to help us understand the work as a whole. It’s good to keep in mind that this a natural cycle – all activities will go through this process eventually and in their own time, either being deactivated or disassembled to make way for a re-envisioned version or something entirely new.

Projects or activities can begin in the Birth stage and move up through the Growth stage, leading up to the point at which they're mature and working well. This Maturity stage is likely where many of our activities and processes are located; they're working well, they're trusted and reliable, they don't need a lot of tweaking.

At this point of Maturity, however, it's possible that activities could fall into what we call the Rigidity Trap. They may be getting stagnant or no longer be working for us (either the process of the work or the activity or initiative itself), but because it's a matured activity, we continue to spend our resources on it.

Activities in this area may be ready for what Ecocycle Planning calls Creative Destruction. This process allows us the freedom to make way for a process of renewal. Creative destruction might sound ominous (or maybe it's even attractive for some of our activities ...), but this does not have to mean complete destruction. Instead, it can be an opportunity to revisit, rethink, or re-envision the workflows, processes, and pieces of an activity. It can mean freedom to throw out an activity and bring forward the knowledge and experience of that activity to develop something completely new. It could also mean reviewing our processes and workflows and tweaking the activity.

The Creative Destruction stage leads us through the Renewal process and into the Gestation period, where new or re-envisioned ideas can start to germinate or develop. The trap here is that activities can struggle to get out of this stage: the Poverty Trap – poverty of resources, personnel, time, energy.

The overall idea of the Ecocycle is to review a portfolio of ideas, mapping them onto this life cycle, in order to identify where we start to see blockages (in these traps for example) and where there are opportunities to renew, build, and grow.

Now the best way to learn Liberating Structures is to put them into action, so we're going to give this one a try.

Trying out Ecocycle Planning

I have done this exercise with my colleagues in my work unit's annual day-long retreat, and we found it useful for seeing the spectrum of our activities and identifying what takes up the most amount of our time.

Given that all of us here do not have the same shared experience as a team, or have the same work contexts and work culture, I'm hoping we can try out a more generic topic that I think we all still have some understanding.

Next steps in Ecocycle Planning

Discussion: Thinking about your experience of doing this Liberating Structure: What was structured? What was liberated?

Choose one activity from those on our Ecocycle. What first step action could you take?

Now what? What actions make sense?

What takeaways do you have?

How might Ecocycle Planning be useful for your work?

Sneaky other Liberating Structures

You thought you were only doing one Liberating Structure, but actually you've also experienced two others!

I used [What, So What, Now What](#) to help frame the stages of our discussion of understanding what Liberating Structures are, why their purpose is useful or valuable, and applying them to our own contexts.

I used an adaptation of [1-2-4-All](#) to structure our small group discussions during the Ecocycle Planning.

Moving forward with Liberating Structures for assessment

I have some ideas about the kinds of Liberating Structures that could be useful in assessment – but this is still a new idea that I'm exploring! I'd love to talk more with others about their ideas or applications of using Liberating Structures in assessment work.

Find all the Liberating Structures: <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/>

Thank you!