

Piloting ‘Krewe School’: An Org School Approach to Social Learning in Social Innovation Education

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Abstract

This paper describes Krewe School, a pilot program at Tulane University that uses an innovative “Org School” approach to social innovation education that targets collective rather than individual capacity-building. Krewe School emphasizes transformative social innovation through an applied social learning program for existing shared-purpose groups that builds capacities and connections for social change. We situate Krewe School in the social innovation educational landscape and align the key features of our program with transformative social innovation theory. We use the TRANSformative Social Innovation Theory (TRANSIT) project’s social learning framework to show how our program’s learning actors, environments, types of learning, and methods are designed to foster new collective understandings and relationships. The paper concludes with insights on adapting this Org School model, highlighting a cohort-based approach, skilled facilitation, a welcoming environment, and varied activities to meet diverse learning objectives. By sharing Krewe School’s core components and practical guidance, we aim to inspire further experimentation and integration of structured social learning programs in educational institutions.

Introduction

Nilsson recently called on social innovation education (SIE) to adopt an “Org School” approach that treats collectives as the unit of the learner.¹ In higher education specifically, SIE aims to equip *individual* students with skills to address complex challenges.² Yet, this approach reinforces the shortcomings of classical social innovation (SI) theories that overemphasize the role of individuals in making change.³ Nilsson argues that the capacities needed to shift system behaviors for long-term social change – such as co-creation, adaptive leadership, and systems thinking – are held by groups rather than individuals.⁴ In the Org School model, learning activities are spread out over time and across members of a group, integrated within the day-to-day work of organizations, and facilitated collaboratively within a wider cohort of groups.

This paper describes an experiment in developing this model in higher education from the perspective of program implementers and researchers. The authors are faculty and graduate students affiliated with the Phyllis M. Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking, a co-curricular unit established at Tulane University in 2015 to cultivate a network of changemakers working towards a more just and equitable society. However, reflections on our

theory of change revealed misalignments between this mission and our programming. Most of our activities historically involved one-off workshops for individuals who often struggled to transfer new skills to group settings or regretted tackling organizational challenges alone. Reading Nilsson’s article together at the Taylor Center catalyzed the idea to pilot an Org School program called “**Krewe School**”⁵ where mission-driven campus and community groups join an experiential learning cohort for a one-to-two-year period to build collective SI capacities and relationships.

We see Krewe School as an opportunity to operationalize and promote ecological views of SI as a relational phenomenon.⁶ Similar to Nilsson’s observations, the TRANSformative Social Innovation Theory (TRANSIT) project frames effective agency as the *collective* abilities of SI groups to challenge and supplant dominant institutions.⁷ In transformative social innovation (TSI) theory, “social learning” develops these transformative capacities by fostering new shared understandings and social relations.⁸ TSI offers a theoretical underpinning for the implementation and assessment of Org School models in SIE, especially given that current evidence is anecdotal.⁹ We demonstrate this alignment by applying TRANSIT’s conceptual model on social learning in TSI to show how we designed the Krewe School program to build collective capacities for transformation. We conclude with implications for other educators who wish to adopt an Org School model to enhance social learning in SI ecosystems.

Social Learning in Krewe School

This section unpacks the key features of the Krewe School program that align with the theory of social learning in TSI. TRANSIT researchers developed this analytical framework through empirical data analysis and case study reports from established SI initiatives within transnational networks, including the Slow Food International Association, European credit unions, financial cooperatives, and The Global Ecovillage Network.¹⁰ By examining how these networks are changing norms, worldviews, and practices in finance, sustainability, and agriculture, they identified four social learning components that build transformative potential: individual **learning actors**, conducive **learning environments**, diverse **types of learning**, and experiential **learning methods**.

Table 1 summarizes specific characteristics of these components as articulated by TRANSIT and how they manifest in Krewe School, which we explain in greater detail below.

Table 1. Comparison of Krewe School’s characteristics with TRANSIT’s framework for analyzing social learning in transformative social innovation. Adapted from Dumitru et al., “Social Learning,” 17.

TRANSIT Analytical Framework for Social Learning in TSI		Krewe School Alignment with TRANSIT Framework
COMPONENTS	CHARACTERISTICS	CHARACTERISTICS
Learning actors	Inspirational leaders and visionaries are individuals who disseminate ideas and build social movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementers are a collaborative team affiliated with a university SI unit, trained in applied social innovation methodologies and pedagogies • Participants are existing groups from purpose-driven organizations that are ready to embrace change, are working toward social transformation, and have enough alignment to make network-building possible
Learning environments	Institutionalized educational programs that support SI capacity-building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning environment is a structured physical space for groups to develop collective capacities for SI through 8-10 day-long sessions over 12-18 months
	Physical spaces and contexts designed to enhance enjoyment, promote social interactions, and support experimentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person sessions take place in a large room with natural light and mobile furniture • Team tables include sticky notes, white boards, and other tactile materials • Groups can mingle and move throughout the space • Activities encourage conversation, collaboration, ideation, and experimentation
Types of learning (i.e., learning objectives)	Cognitive learning: gaining new conceptual knowledge to understand systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators share concepts, teach through examples, and provide time to practice methods like systems mapping, problem scoping, sensemaking, prototyping, and empathy research • Participants reframe complex problems as opportunities to change systems
	Personal and emotional learning: unlearning stereotypes, listening to others, and developing trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohort creates social norms based on practices for multicultural teamwork • Facilitators and participants lead activities to reflect on emotions, appreciations, regrets, and areas for "un-learning" • Participants conduct research to build empathy with their stakeholders
	Strategic learning: building relationships to increase influence in networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants connect across groups to support alliances between individuals and organizations to build influence for social transformation across local networks and beyond

	<p>Relational learning: developing new social relations in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Supporting high-quality motivation of members -Learning to participate in cooperative decision-making -Developing communication and leadership skills -Learning with and between different social milieus and intercultural learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups focus on their "big why?" to reinforce their sense of purpose • Table facilitators highlight autonomy and strengths of individuals and groups for collaborative problem-solving • Groups practice co-creation to enhance participants' buy-in and satisfaction • Table facilitators encourage full group collaboration in creating theories and designs, transcending organizational hierarchies, and developing shared identities • Curriculum provides conversation structures (e.g., breakout pairs) and statement frames (e.g.: "I heard... which makes me wonder...") • Facilitators explicitly name deep listening and openness as essential leadership tools • Facilitators invite exploring new social norms to challenge dominant cultures • Participants reflect on identity-based worldviews, strengths, and biases • Activities encourage connecting with individuals in the room who have different experiences and collaborating across organizations • Participants seek diverse perspectives to better understand how contextual challenges arise in their systems
<p>Learning methods (i.e., pedagogical approaches)</p>	<p>Re-framing knowledge by uplifting diverse ways of knowing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program prioritizes perspectives across job role hierarchies and personal experiences (e.g., enrolling whole groups, not leaders only) • Participants are invited to see themselves and stakeholders as experts
	<p>Self-oriented learning and collective experimentation that supports groups' exploration of new approaches and alternative solutions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum guides groups through applied, experiential processes to co-create innovations and living documents for their organizations and networks • Table facilitators encourage groups to address their organization's sticky problems by selecting focus areas for activities • Curriculum creates space for groups to brainstorm, build, and test creative ideas
	<p>Facilitating deliberation through participatory processes for group decision-making</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Table facilitators guide participatory group analysis of the organization's sticky questions and support group decision-making on next steps • Table facilitator structure enables groups to deviate from session agendas as needed

Learning Actors and Environments

While the TRANSIT framework emphasizes individual learning actors,¹¹ Krewe School treats the group as the main learning actor. This collective philosophy begins with the program implementers, who built a foundational culture of collaboration prior to implementation. This team includes five staff and faculty who work together closely to create and facilitate the curriculum. One faculty member and two graduate students conduct research and evaluation activities, and three staff provide operational support. We select participants from existing purpose-driven units such as non-profit organizations or university departments who enroll as a group, though groups may have looser affiliations in coalitions or include stakeholders like volunteers. For recruitment, program implementers share marketing materials and solicit

nominations in our networks; from there, interested groups attend informational luncheons and complete a short application that assesses potential for social impact, organizational and cultural change, and inter- and intra-group collaboration. The pilot cohort included four university sub-units with diverse missions around community violence, workplace conflict, racial equity, and K-12 education. Our next cohort includes locally-based non-profits working in youth development, housing, and environmental sustainability.

While TRANSIT identified many different social learning environments, Krewe School most resembles an institutionalized training program, similar to the transnational network of Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability (DESIS) design school labs (though operating more locally).¹² Group-based training programs are more common outside academia: consultancies like Design Impact lead teams through applied SI processes, and IDEO U offers team-based learning in virtual cohorts.¹³ Our unique advantage is offering a place-based, highly relational, and tailored series of in-person encounters for our participating groups so that they can shift relationships within their units *and* connect with a local network of actors with similar missions, challenges, and audiences. We theorize that bringing these groups together will catalyze a visionary network of actors exchanging ideas on strategies, building alliances for support, and using shared SI languages and approaches. The groups can then serve as leaders for other organizations aiming to incorporate design thinking or systems-minded strategies for innovation.

Krewe School cohorts meet over the course of a year or 18 months for multiple (8-10) in-person, half-day sessions. The spacing and frequency of sessions are adapted to each cohort's needs. Sessions might regularly occur every other month or be condensed into a few "bootcamp"-style weeks every few months. These sessions parallel TRANSIT's observations on successful physical learning environments. Held in a large, naturally lit room with mobile furniture, participants can socialize and move freely. Tables are equipped with whiteboards and tactile materials like clay and markers to support 'serious play.' For example, one warm-up exercise involves prototyping the prompt, "What do you need right now for well-being?" out of pipe cleaners or popsicle sticks. In between sessions, Krewe School facilitators offer light coaching to support groups' unique needs and processes, and participants conduct research activities such as observations or experiments with stakeholders.

Types of Learning

Similar to SI initiatives studied by TRANSIT, our center prioritizes *cognitive, relational, strategic, and emotional* learning objectives in all of our programs.¹⁴ Figure 1 below shows how our Krewe School curriculum interweaves common SI methodologies to achieve these different types of learning in an applied experience for a cohort of groups. We guide Krewe School participants through an integrated *human-centered design* and *theory of change* process to help them creatively and empathetically build alternatives that align with their organization or network's visions and strategies for change. *Systems thinking* offers mindsets throughout to help participants contextualize their work, understand complexity, and leverage interconnections. *Equity, diversity, and inclusion*, which our staff and faculty have promoted in SIE¹⁵, provide a normative framework for working interculturally toward social justice. Though SI scholars,

educators, and practitioners use and integrate similar approaches,¹⁶ we rarely see frameworks that combine all these methodologies in one curriculum.

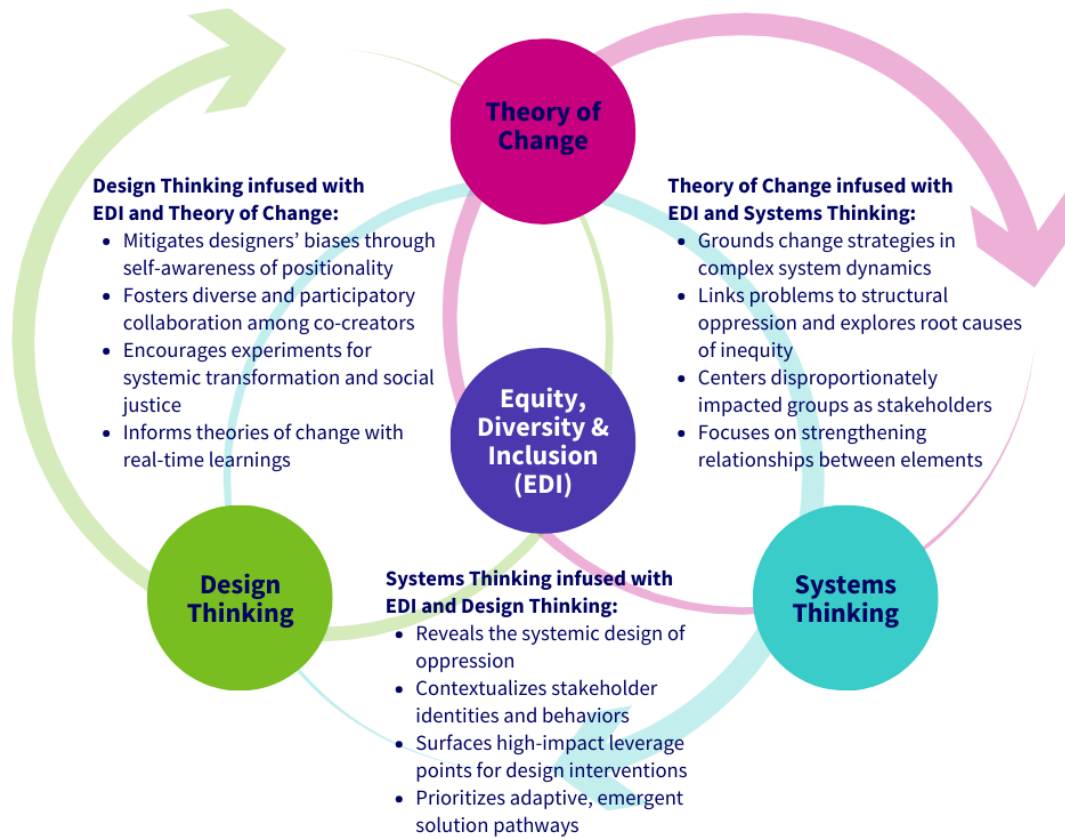


Figure 1. *Conceptual model of how social innovation methodologies are integrated into the Krewe School curriculum*

Figure 2 offers an overview of how we translate these methodologies into a curriculum cycle, though we anticipate revising this structure from cohort to cohort. In the pilot program, each circle represented a separate session on the topic listed. However, based on participant feedback, we already modified the curriculum to 1) build in more iterative spirals of learning, 2) clarify the learning trajectory for participants at the beginning of the program, and 3) accommodate different stages of organizational development. The latter issue became apparent in the pilot when one well-established group arrived with a theory of change while another newly emerging group had little formalized structure or strategy. Therefore, we will begin the next Krewe School cohort by inviting participants to articulate a cohort-wide vision for change together. They will also complete an introductory design thinking workshop that previews the entire curriculum. From there, groups will loop through the learning cycle. From the first three-hour workshop, sessions expand to two- and three-day bootcamps that complete this cycle but pick up new pieces along the way. For example, session three will go deeper into formal methods of systems mapping. Groups conclude a cycle by revising (or creating) their theory of change based on their learning and presenting this journey to each other and formal audiences of key stakeholders.



Figure 2. The curriculum cycle for Krewé School that demonstrates progressive learning loops over time

Each session supports multiple learning objectives. For *cognitive learning*, agenda segments begin with content overviews followed by time for participants to apply concepts to their work. For example, facilitators teach systems mapping by 1) explaining the tenets of systems thinking and its relevance for theories of change and 2) offering a selection of methods like stakeholder mapping, stock and flow diagrams, or iceberg models to practice visualizing important relationships in systems. For *emotional learning*, sessions feature intentional grounding and reflection activities like meditations, land acknowledgments, and appreciations. For *relational learning*, intercultural team-building exercises invite participants to challenge established social relations, reflect on individual worldviews or dominant organizational cultures, and “try on” inclusive collaboration strategies like active listening. For *strategic learning*, groups regularly provide feedback on each other’s theories and designs. Cross-team time helps participants connect, share resources, and find synergies to build networks and increase their impact.

Learning Methods

Krewe School uses pedagogies similar to those identified by TRANSIT.¹⁷ Krewe School promotes *reframing knowledge* by enrolling whole groups (not just leaders) and welcoming diverse perspectives across hierarchies and experiences. Facilitators also encourage participants to see themselves and stakeholders as co-creators, supporting *self-oriented learning and collective experimentation*. Participants reported valuing this semi-structured time to step back from daily work and creatively explore and strategize solutions to their organization’s “sticky problems.” Intentional processes for *facilitating deliberation* aim to enhance the effectiveness of this team time. Facilitators spend more time working closely *with* participants than leading from the front. An embedded “table facilitator” works with one group per session as a coach or thought partner. This decentralized structure allows facilitators to tailor agendas and coaching to each group’s needs.

These approaches are evident throughout the curriculum cycle. For example, one facilitator prepares groups for human-centered design by emphasizing different kinds of knowledge. She starts by visualizing the many roles she embodies as a professor, mother, and community member to encourage participants to recognize their current knowledge assets, as well as to consider which perspectives are missing from their theory of change and find those among other groups. This perspective-seeking continues through independent research to learn about their stakeholders’ diverse experiences, values, and aspirations. Groups collaboratively develop “how might we...?” questions to address issues identified in research and generate many possible solutions to that question. Participants then prototype their ideas to test with stakeholders. Table facilitators support this process by taking notes, engaging all group members, and guiding deliberations on the next steps.

Social Learning Outcomes and Societal Impacts

Krewe School aims to develop groups’ collective capacities for transformation, deepen relationships within and across groups, and explore new pathways to address complex challenges. These goals align with social learning outcomes identified by TRANSIT, which include collective changes in *empowerment, the qualities of social relations, behaviors and strategies for action, and understanding that lead to narratives of change*.¹⁸ Internal program data on the pilot suggest that Krewe School can achieve these outcomes. Exit interviews indicate participants felt more empowered to address issues as a team. We also observed new social relations emerging as groups practiced co-creation and shared leadership, such as initially silent participants becoming more vocal. Groups engaged in deep conversations about internal and external systems and built on their new understandings to develop theories of change and new ideas for action. The purpose of this paper was to describe how Krewe School is designed for social learning; for future research, we are preparing a mixed-methods summative evaluation of the next cohort to rigorously assess program learning outcomes.

Social learning in SI initiatives also has the potential to contribute to wider societal impacts, such as *changes in societal worldviews, changes in norms and institutions, changes in ways of doing, changes in social culture, and new actionable capacities*.¹⁹ For example, the European credit cooperative Febea worked with the European Commission to distinguish ethical versus

traditional banking, seeking to re-frame knowledge that safeguards cooperative models as a new norm in finance. Similarly, we anticipate that Krewe School participants will use their enhanced capacities to change mission-related worldviews, norms, and institutions in their systems. The first cohort comprised units from the same institution (i.e., Tulane University), which could affect transformative capacities across the university and influence other academic institutions, private enterprises, and community organizations in Tulane's network. We see potential in longitudinal studies to document these secondary effects.

Discussion

While Krewe School represents a unique approach to SIE, this model requires additional testing in other contexts to strengthen the evidence on Org School programs' contributions to social learning for TSI. Therefore, we offer recommendations for adapting Krewe School:

- **Recruit organizations with shared purposes or values.** Organizational missions should be factored into enrollment and curriculum. While groups' fields and approaches need not match exactly, some alignment can enhance peer learning, such as having groups focused on youth development or frontline service provision. Facilitators can help the cohort identify connections across contexts, causes, and values.
- **Utilize a large team of facilitators skilled in co-producing knowledge.** Facilitators who are comfortable leading from the front *and* sharing power with participants can create space for emergent and alternative knowledge. "Table facilitators" can tailor content and processes to groups' organizational stages and needs by going off-agenda or balancing group dynamics.
- **Create a welcoming, tactile, and playful learning environment.** Time constraints, distractions, and unequal participation are all to be expected. Materials, activities, and spaces that invite interaction, curiosity, reflection, and creativity can help participants feel more present in intensive experiences (though these strategies may not work for everyone).
- **Offer different activities to balance cognitive, relational, emotional, and strategic learning.** Balance lecture, relevant examples, and practice with reflection, listening, and meditation. Create collaboration and feedback structures, both within and across groups, that allow teams to forge alliances, develop intercultural communication skills, and practice participatory decision-making.

We recognize that some of our suggestions may not suit different institutional environments and challenges. However, we encourage others to draw on the TRANSIT social learning framework and Krewe School design recommendations to adapt an Org School model that works for their context and participants.

Conclusion

This paper utilizes TRANSIT's social learning for transformative social innovation framework to illustrate how our new program, Krewe School, takes an Org School approach to social innovation education. Key social learning components and characteristics include 1) groups as

the learning actors, 2) a place-based, dynamic learning environment, 3) experiential learning methods, and 4) a curriculum that integrates different learning objectives. We share these features along with practical guidance on adapting Krewe School to inspire other educators to develop their own Org School programs to build transformative potential in social innovation ecosystems.

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¹¹Dumitru et al., “Social Learning”, 44-45.

¹²Dumitru et al., “Social Learning”, 27-30.

¹³See Design Impact’s “About” page <https://d-impact.org/about/> and IDEO U’s “Team Courses” page: https://www.ideo.com/pages/team-training?_gl=1*770f21*_up*MQ..&gclid=Cj0KCQjwr9m3BhDHARIsANut04bW71CI6iOsg4cVgTKCKIx-PANdahjsfLacoYHpeFOyHGaCTPzNY6waAuv9EALw_wcB, accessed September 27, 2024.

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