

PROCESS, PIPELINES AND TEEMING

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Our conventional idea of a process comes from industry, machines and equipment. The assembly line proceeds from one stage to another in a set order. When we buy a new phone or appliance for the home, it comes with instructions telling us how to proceed, step-by-step.

Processes are presented as a one-way pipelines of very limited breadth.

In understanding learning, evolution and growth, the pipeline model is dangerous. Stephen Jay Gould, the master of modern evolutionary theory, has pointed out that contrary to conventional conceptions, evolution does not progress in any tree-like or pipeline manner. It advances like a bush, or perhaps like shrubbery, following no single core route “leading upward” that could be anticipated. Instead, it has countless parallel routes going in different directions.

Consider an ant hill. It is teeming with countless individual ants apparently moving in different directions at random. But at the same time it is growing and evolving. The whole is far more than the sum of its parts. The whole ant hill – and the paths leading from it to its surroundings – is a process. But it is not a pipeline; it is something that pullulates.

Consider skateboarders. They make their way around cities and the world, coming together and separating again. As a whole, skateboarding is a process similar to pullulation. Many people find it to be an annoying disturbance. Skateboarders do not appear to be doing anything useful. Why aren't they studying, working or developing themselves like respectable citizens?

But skateboarding develops and evolves, as shown by the excellent documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001) with its analysis of skateboarding in the 1970s. It is a lifestyle that produces things new - new tricks and techniques, new places, new ways of sensing and comprehending the city, new ways of speaking, and new bonds between people. It even produces new technology and new commercial products, even though they

aren't its goal. And don't try to claim that skateboarding doesn't require learning. Try it and see if it's easy.

In skateboarding, learning and evolution proceed as something that teems and abounds. There is no one way of skateboarding well, and there is no single correct direction for skateboarding to develop. In fact, even industrial processes are much more akin to teeming than we imagine. This becomes evident when we begin to examine disturbances, surprises and changes. Not only do people carry out tasks in a set order, they also look and listen, argue, seek help from each other, and reach out sideways from the pipeline. The teeming is there whether we want it or not.

It's high time to begin to appreciate teeming.