The Journey of DIT

Lessons Learned by the Design Impact Transition Platform

The Land of Shifting Sands

A realm where the very foundations are in constant motion, symbolizing change and transformation.

Lesson 3: Redesign funding models

Lesson 4: Redefine careers & roles

The Mountains of Struggle

A towering range where only the most determined can ascend

Lesson 10: Unlearn entrenched systems

Lesson 11: Persist against adverse power structures

The Confluence of Tides

A mystical meeting point where rivers of thought, talent, and purpose converge into an unstoppable force

Lesson 5: Identify & find allies

Lesson 6: Cultivate safe spaces

The Citadel of Possibilities

A towering stronghold where new visions are born, and alternative futures are designed.

Lesson 7: Reflect on where you are going

Lesson 8: Build a repertoire of activities

Lesson 9: Build trustful relationships

The Glade of Hidden Paths

An enchanting forest where unseen opportunities wait for those sharp enough to spot them.

Lesson 1: Leverage to legitimize

Lesson 2: Act on opportunities

The Journey of DIT

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"Redesigning our systems is crucial to effectively combat deeply rooted societal norms."
(DIT Staff 2023)

About DIT's Journey

Between 2021-2024, the DIT platform empowered radically new ways to do research, education and engagement at Erasmus University Rotterdam for a just and sustainable future. Over that time, a total of 38 people engaged in work streams towards this goal.

About the Design Impact Transition (DIT) Platform
The DIT Platform, active at Erasmus University (EUR) from 2021 to 2024, served as a strategic initiative to advance transformative approaches in research, education, and societal engagement.
It sought to foster innovative practices aimed at addressing complex and enduring societal challenges, with a focus on achieving a just and sustainable future. By convening academics, students, staff members, and external stakeholders, the platform provided a collaborative space for developing and testing pioneering solutions to pressing global issues.

Why is it important to learn from the DIT journey ?

Crucially, DIT platform aimed to experiment with new ways of doing, thinking and organising academia: If we put societal challenges first, what is then required from academics and their work? And what are the institutional structures needed to foster this kind of work?

What do we share?

In this document, we share some of our lessons and experiences from this three-year journey about how to go about making space for different practices, ideas and perspectives for academia within an academic setting. The quotes and insights included in this document directly capture the voices, experiences, and reflections of those deeply involved in DIT's work.

Who should learn from this journey?

With this document, we hope to take those of you along who are looking for concrete ideas and for inspiration on how to 'work' the academic system from within. It offers a window into the challenges, opportunities, and dynamics of institutional experiments such as DIT, as well as actionable ideas for advancing transformative academic work in complex institutional settings.

How We Developed Our Lessons: A Reflexive Approach
Our reflexive monitoring process (see e.g. the Reflexive Monitoring Guidebook for more) spanned three years and involved conducting three rounds of interviews with key stakeholders. These interviews were synthesized and analyzed to identify key insights and themes, which were then distilled into 11 lessons. These lessons, presented in the following document, reflect the evolving understanding and challenges encountered throughout the process, providing valuable guidance for future initiatives and actions.

Where can this map take you?

Each lesson is described in more detail, including a project or action from the DIT Platform illustrating this lesson and offering a short evaluation of the project. Each lesson is also complemented by quotes selected from three rounds of yearly interviews of DIT platform staff to substantiate the lesson and elucidate the reflections of DIT's employees.
– for a fuller overview of this see the DIT Timeline.

Summary of Results: Key Lessons from Reflexive Monitoring

The reflexive monitoring of DIT over three years revealed five thematic clusters that symbolize distinct aspects of systemic transformation. These clusters offer lessons for navigating the complexities of driving change:

- **The Glade of Hidden Paths:** This cluster highlights the importance of recognizing and leveraging unseen opportunities to catalyse systemic transformation. It emphasizes action and strategic use of existing mechanisms: *Leverage the System to Legitimize Transformation* and *Act on Opportunities*.

- **The Land of Shifting Sand:** Representing the fluid and dynamic nature of systems, this cluster focuses on adaptability and redesigning institutional frameworks to enable transformation: *Redesign Funding* and *Redesign Careers & Roles*.

- **The Confluence of Tides:** A symbolic convergence of diverse ideas, talents, and goals, this cluster underscores the importance of collaboration and fostering supportive environments: *Find Allies* and *Build Trustful Relationships*.

- **The Citadel of Possibilities:** This cluster represents a space for visionary thinking and experimentation with alternative futures. It emphasizes resilience, reflection, and the development of diverse transformative approaches: *Reflect on Where You Are Going*, *Build a Repertoire of Transformative Activities & Approaches*, *Create Safe Spaces*,

- **The Mountains of Struggle:** Symbolizing the challenges and perseverance required for systemic change, this cluster emphasizes the necessity of letting go of entrenched norms: *Unlearn the System* and *Persist in the Face of Adverse Power Structures*.

By leveraging these insights, we hope future initiatives can better address challenges, foster transformation in education, research, and engagement, and sustain momentum in their transformative efforts.

LESSON 1: Leveraging Systems to Foster Transformation

DESCRIPTION:

Transformative initiatives increase their effectiveness and legitimacy by strategically engaging with existing systems while simultaneously working to reshape them. This approach requires aligning with established frames, goals, and rules to gain traction and support for change. By leveraging familiar narratives and processes, initiatives can articulate their objectives in ways that resonate with current structures, thereby facilitating the acceptance and integration of new ideas and practices.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

TransEUR: Transforming the Erasmus University Rotterdam

TransEUR utilized conventional academic research methods to understand the factors influencing transformative academic work at EUR and published findings in academic journals. Additionally, it produced policy reports tailored for EUR, feeding those into the organization making use of existing mechanisms.

In TransEUR, DIT created legitimacy for their work by building an academic evidence base and formulating policy lessons – however, while the former is taken up, the latter did not influence university policy, at least not in the short term. Click here to read more

Sustainability Narratives

This project explored the role of strategic communication in embedding sustainability across Erasmus University's practices. It examined how narratives, crafted through communication efforts, could shift the university's approach from merely reporting on sustainability to fostering actionable change. By analyzing existing efforts and identifying opportunities for dialogue and storytelling, the project highlighted how strategic communication could inspire collective action and support the university's transition to a more sustainable future.

QUOTES:

"One of the major differences, I think, is that DIT was set up to try to disrupt the embedded hierarchies at the university. Unsurprisingly, it has not entirely succeeded in this because, of course, it still needs to work within or in relation to that university."
(DIT staff 2024)

"Framing is important: How goals and missions are communicated is crucial for driving transformative action and creating an action-oriented culture."
(DIT staff 2024)

"The initiatives disconnect from university leadership prevented meaningful structural change..."
(DIT staff 2024)

LESSON 2: Seize Opportunities for Change

DESCRIPTION:

Windows of opportunity play a crucial role in processes of social change: shifting political, economic, or social conditions make change more likely or create contexts more conducive for innovative ideas to be realized. Such opportunities may enable the alignment of resources, narratives and innovative ideas, accelerating the adoption of transformative solutions. DIT harnessed such opportunities by prefiguring flexible, inclusive, and interdisciplinary spaces that foster collaboration and innovation, turning potential into actionable solutions.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Consulting as Academic Practice:

This project explores the variety of academic practices in the transdisciplinary spectrum between scientific research, consulting action-oriented research and was born out of the opportunity of a visiting research from the Intersectoral School of Governance Baden-Würtemberg staying at DRIFT. While starting late in the DIT journey, this project quickly built steam and trialled an arts-based interview method on the roles of researchers at that interface, and an academic paper workshop with 25 attendees and 15 paper presentations.

Sustainability Dialogues:

The Sustainability Dialogues took place across nine individual schools within the university, as well as through three cross-school dialogues involving EUR. With over 500 participants, the dialogues helped form lasting communities in several faculties, fostering ongoing exchanges and sustained collaboration. The engagement of the EUR community in these dialogues enabled participants to reach consensus on key sustainability issues. This participatory process resulted in tangible outcomes, including policy and action proposals, and contributed to the creation of an Academic Green Deal and new networks within Dutch universities.

QUOTES:

It doesn't have to be DIT as the central role, not even the advisor, more the connector then.
(DIT staff 2022)

LESSON 3: Redesign Funding Models

DESCRIPTION:

Current funding structures and mechanisms often hinder inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration – piloting and implementing alternative funding and incentive models is key. Our research showed that these need to be more adaptable to changing circumstances and evolving opportunities, to foster a collaborative culture and real-world orientation rather than disciplinary excellence, and to allow for a diversity of organisations to participate.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Funding and Governing Transdisciplinary Research

In collaboration with ACCEZ, an organisation accelerating sustainable transitions in South Holland, DIT devised a mutually beneficial learning journey to explore lessons for how to fund and govern transdisciplinary research more effectively.

The collaboration with ACCEZ helped refine its role as an engaged funding agency for transdisciplinary research and provided insights for the Dutch Climate Institute (KIN) aiming to innovate amongst others consortium-building processes. It expanded DIT's network and role beyond the University system and partners continue finding each other for follow up engagements.

QUOTE:

"Considering the whole system around funding and governance of research projects...it does not help to be interdisciplinary." *(DIT staff 2024)*

LESSON 4: Redefine Careers & Roles

DESCRIPTION:

Conventional academic roles and career paths often hinder inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration and action-oriented scholarship. Therefore, rethinking traditional structures, introducing inclusive models for career progression, and promoting diverse roles that bridge academic and support functions and challenge entrenched hierarchies limiting access and equity are needed.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Different Career Paths at DIT:

DIT emphasized the need for academics, students, and staff to be equipped with roles and career paths that enable them to work towards just and sustainable futures. It introduced the role of 'developer' to bridge the traditional idea between support and academic lines of working and introduced secondments for researchers from different faculties to join DIT and further develop their transformative lines of working in a like-minded environment.

   In introducing such new roles, DIT encountered challenges, such as the unfamiliarity with such different job titles which harbour both opportunities but also uncertainties about one's exact role. While the secondments were kept and worked well for anchoring academic staff both in their faculties and in the cross-faculty team; the developer roles were soon dismissed in favour of more concrete project-related roles, which is a missed opportunity but also testifies to the temporary and result-bound structure within which the DIT platform had to exist.

QUOTES:

"We tried to create a very collaborative context. So, it means that people have to work together to get to the results, so you need each other. But also means that people are expected to give each other access and time and call upon each other for feedback. So that there is also a social mechanism of checks and balances." *(DIT staff 2023)*

"But then what does it mean to be an academic here in in DIT and what does it mean to be core team? Look at how we also share the responsibilities of this space that we are physically in together. Ask who does the dishes?" *(DIT staff 2023)*

LESSON 5: Identify & Engage Allies

DESCRIPTION:

Finding allies is crucial for transforming a system, as collective action amplifies influence and builds the critical mass needed for meaningful change. In academia, this means forging connections both within and outside the system to strengthen legitimacy and foster collaboration. External allies—individuals and organizations that share your mission—provide validation, demonstrate that you are not alone in seeking change, and offer a peer community for learning, exchange, and inspiration. Together, these partnerships bring diverse perspectives, resources, and networks, creating resilience and enabling effective action against resistance.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Visiting Researchers:

DIT found allies from different countries and contexts to work together on this topic as a peer community. The visiting researchers embodied the role of an external ally by bringing fresh perspectives, expertise, and networks that validate and strengthen the host institution's transformative efforts. Through DIT's collaboration with visiting researchers, bridges were built between internal and external communities, fostering legitimacy, resilience, and the exchange of innovative ideas essential for collective action and meaningful change.

Radical Imagination in Transitions (RViT):

DIT found an ally in Stichting Doen with whom they developed the project focusing on social art practices, sustainability, inclusivity and social justice. RViT looked to strengthen ties by creating a vision, running a literature study, mapping social art practices in Rotterdam, conducting learning experiments and finally reflecting on the results and process.

RViT has provided valuable insights into opportunities of bringing together alternative perspectives of art and science to strengthen transformative power and move towards justice – recommending the development of a Transition Atelier method.

QUOTES:

"Provide a harbour for those people that want to do it differently within the universities – connect them on the inside but also to the outside."
(DIT staff 2022)

"We are a platform that tries to kind of change the Erasmus University from the inside out. And next to that, we also really try to make connections to the outside world to try to create a space where academics and stakeholders or societal actors come together to work on complex societal challenges."
(DIT staff 2023)

LESSON 6: Cultivate Safe Spaces

DESCRIPTION:

Dedicated spaces like DIT enable actors to innovate and experiment shielded from the constraints of traditional university structures. By fostering subcultures that encourage creativity, risk-taking, and collaboration, these spaces support the organic development of transformative and impactful practices.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Transformative Repair

This research reimagined repair as both a practical and symbolic act of sustainability. It explored visible mending to shift cultural norms toward repair rather than disposal.

DIT helped staff to experiment with alternative methodologies such as transformative repair. Crucially, the experimentation was shared with students, colleagues and the wider network through workshops to increase awareness of transformative and impactful practices.

Just Fashion Transition

This research aimed to accelerate the fashion and textile transition by collaborating across universities, disciplines, and with societal partners to drive systemic change toward a just, sustainable industry.

The Just Fashion Transition initiative effectively advanced the dialogue on sustainable practices within the fashion industry, leveraging interdisciplinary collaboration and societal partnerships to accelerate systemic change. With significant contributions such as keynote presentations, guest lectures, and publications, it solidified its role as a critical space for pioneering research and dissemination in the pursuit of a just and sustainable fashion transition.

QUOTES:

"DIT created a subculture that protected from negative elements of the wider institution, promoting collaboration."
(DIT staff 2024)

"All voices are equally heard... my voice was equally listened to and incorporated as much as theirs... there's a sense of freedom and trust." (DIT staff 2023)

DESCRIPTION:

Transformation requires placing a dot on the horizon – a direction for the journey towards an academic world that supports diverse academic practices to foster just and sustainable futures. Ideally, such a direction is collaboratively formulated, includes a transformative ambition and sets an ethical framework while maintaining openness to evolving pathways. Once you are on your journey, always remember your transformative ambition and keep it at the forefront of your work. This can be done by organizing a systematic process of reflection, learning and action, which thrives in an environment that embraces uncertainty, encourages risk-taking, and supports organic idea development, driving creativity and transformative practices.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

DIT Narrative for Change

DIT's Narrative for Change was collaboratively formulated by the team and revisited to account for new team members joining. It formulates the team's understanding of the necessities for and directions of a transformation of academia and outlines the team's values as well as main strategies – emphasizing collective action in creating inclusive and sustainable change. The Narrative of Change effectively established a shared vision and strategic framework, fostering team cohesion and adaptability while emphasizing collective action for inclusive and sustainable academic transformation – however, it needed reminders and engagement with it to stay alive in a team with changing and part-time members.

Reflexive Monitoring

DIT considered itself an action-research experiment and as such had organized a systematic reflexive monitoring process including about 45 interviews and six workshops – to allow for reflection, learning, changing course and dwelling on tensions over the 3-year period. Reflexive monitoring fostered continuous learning and real-time adjustments, enabling DIT to adapt to emerging needs and refine strategies throughout project evolution. While it encouraged systemic thinking uncertainties about DIT's future and limited funding constrained long-term planning and hindered efforts to address deeper structural barriers and institutional changes.

QUOTES:

"We question more and keep questioning what we're doing and if it's still serving our purpose... not just doing [...] routine."
(DIT staff 2023)

"Activism can never be a safe space. We have to talk about difficult things. How do you make a brave space where you take responsibility together."
(DIT staff 2023)

LESSON 8: Build a Repertoire of Activities & Approaches

DESCRIPTION:

For addressing complex societal challenges, it is important to develop and test diverse tools and strategies that foster transformative practices. Doing so establishes an evidence base, supported by tested and refined tools, for researchers and educators to rely on when adopting transformative academic practices.

QUOTE:

"Any academic institution should have space if they want to be truly innovative [...] Research and teaching needs space for experimentation." *(DIT staff 2023)*

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Transforming Education
This work was designed to reimagine university practices through the exploration of teacher development, systemic change, and innovative learning methodologies. It provided educators with the space, resources, and opportunities to experiment with unconventional approaches, including board games and educational pilots. Through this process, educators tested and refined methods to enhance their teaching practices and personal development, ensuring these innovations were made readily available for broader use.

Education Pilot: Sustainability for Education
This pilot integrated sustainability into education activities in collaboration with EUR schools, DIT, and Impact at the Core, aligning with EUR's Climate Emergency Declaration. The program classified sustainability topics, developed a dedicated course, and provided staff training, equipping educators with the tools to incorporate sustainability into their teaching practices.

Communicating for a Sustainable Future
This guide explored how communication professionals can harness the transformative power of effective communication to promote sustainability. It addressed the unique challenges communicators faced, offering insights from innovative case studies and practical strategies for driving meaningful change. Through this process, we learned the importance of tailoring messages to diverse audiences, advocating for organizational support, and leveraging creative approaches to overcome barriers and foster a sustainable future

LESSON 9: Build Trustful Relationships

DESCRIPTION:

Transformative initiatives gain impact by breaking down silos and fostering collaboration across disciplines, roles, and boundaries. Prioritizing trust, equity, and shared goals creates supportive spaces for interdisciplinary dialogue and agile, trust-based decision-making, enabling innovative solutions to societal and sustainability challenges. Relationship-building occurs both within teams and between departments, faculties, and external actors, fostering a culture of empathy and diversity.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Action Research PhD study group:

After having attended the Erasmus Graduate School of Social and Behavioural Sciences on 'Action-oriented research for social change', students and lecturer aimed to continue a space for a free and save exchange on experiences, questions and struggles of such research for early-career researchers. This led to the foundation of a PhD learning community on action-oriented research supported by DIT. The PhD-community grew into a community of around 30 early career researchers of which some 5-10 attend the bi-monthly meetings with differing foci.

QUOTES:

"Building trust enables effective collaboration across disciplines and with external stakeholders." *(DIT staff 2024)*

"A big one... care... that I genuinely feel like, you know, we care for each other as a community. It's not like we're just coworkers." *(DIT staff 2023)*

LESSON 10: Unlearn Entrenched Systems

DESCRIPTION:

To transform academia, individuals and organizations must critically examine and let go of entrenched, outdated practices that hinder growth, equity, and collaboration. This unlearning is not limited to personal behaviours but must also address structural and systemic assumptions embedded in academic policies and practices.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Collaborative Ethics in Transformative Research

In this research, we examined ethical dilemmas faced by transformative researchers which partly surface from the incompatibility of institutional ethical review processes, guidelines and bodies with their transformative research practice. Scrutinising this means also examining which principles and behaviours we can let go of and how do we need to redesign such processes and bodies.

By collaborating with researchers from McGill University, Canada, this research brought new perspectives on how institutional review processes can be designed; while it also led to an action research process with institutional representatives aiming to change the ethical review process at EUR. It highlighted the importance of unlearning entrenched assumptions for creating generative working environments for ethical transdisciplinary research.

QUOTES:

"Unlearning harmful behaviours is essential, and this process must occur on personal, organizational, and societal levels."
*(DIT staff 2023)*

"How can we create a space for different cultures, ethnographies, backgrounds, beliefs? How do all these things come together? I think that really needs to change within the university because I do feel like we have it in Rotterdam as a city"
(DIT staff 2023)

"Sometimes we don't even actually notice that we are acting conform to the system. And that that comes down to a very, very personal you know, I think we are really good humans, and we really do our best. But that also means that we constantly need to change."
(DIT staff 2023)
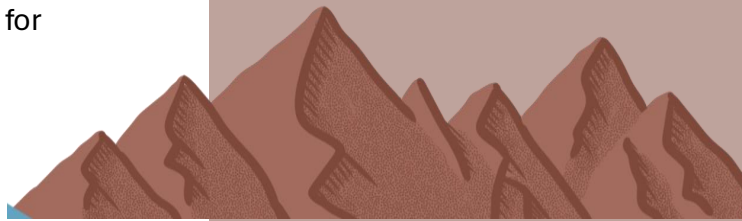
LESSON 11: Persist Against Adverse Power Structures

DESCRIPTION:

Driving meaningful and sustainable change requires continuously challenging unhealthy power dynamics within academic institutions. By amplifying diverse voices, dismantling entrenched hierarchies, and creating collaborative spaces, academia can foster inclusivity and equity. This persistent effort ensures that transformative outcomes are achieved, even in the face of systemic resistance.

HOW DID WE WORK ON IT?

Masters Societal Transitions

Illu DIT's commitment to innovative educational frameworks that prioritize competence-based learning, the creation, implementation and running of this programme was ripe with power struggles: think of a disciplinary exam board having to ensure quality for an inter- and transdisciplinary programme; and the attempt to have the programme being hosted and exploited by a cross-faculty collaboration (rather than being embedded in one faculty); and putting competence-based learning at an equal footing with knowledge-focused learning. The programme is up and running and continues to attract students for the second academic year now. It is competence-based for which it was applauded by the accreditation board and maxes out the space given by and in negotiation with the exam board, it remains embedded in one faculty and governed by the usual inter-faculty regulations for collaboration across faculties, which are not very favourable of such collaborations.

Artist in Residence

The artist in residence enriched DIT's work by offering creative perspectives that challenged conventional thinking, inspired new visions for the "dot on the horizon," and fostered alignment and motivation among stakeholders. The 6-month position successfully amplified DIT's voice overtly and subversively around the EUR campus through visible action initiated by the artist. The artist successfully engaged with many DIT employees of all types by basing their action from initial conversations with employees and inviting them to participate in their art in action.

QUOTES:

"One of the major differences [to other institutions], I think, is that DIT was set up to try to disrupt the embedded hierarchies at the university."
(DIT staff 2024)

"How is everything locked in so much and there's an extreme inability to change? To be honest, I don't know enough about this to be able to explain why, but I think a lot of it has to do with **how we are used to working with power especially**. I don't know how feasible this is, but I would **love to see reflectiveness being more of a thing.** If the university, or all its people, look back at themselves and look at the good and bad bits, then there's actually space given for change. Creat[e] systems or structures for easier reflection"
(DIT staff 2023)
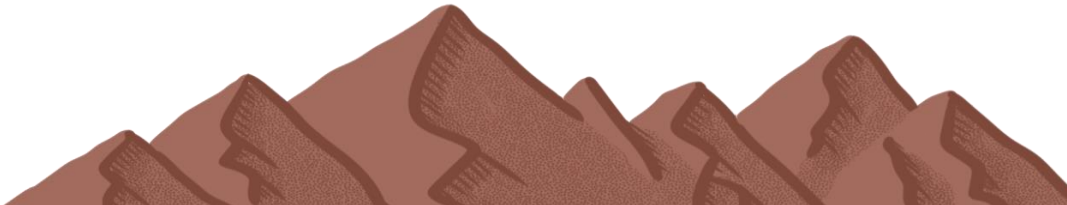
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Authors: Julia Wittmayer & Rachel Williams

Designers: Emma Tram & Rachel Williams

With many thanks to all DIT staff for engaging in the reflexive monitoring activities and sharing their passion and wisdom allowing us to learn together.