

**CONVERSATION CAFÉ ABSTRACTS — ADDENDUM: 2009–11–14**

## Action Science as Transformative Learning

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Action science provides both a theoretical perspective of action and a process for challenging and understanding the assumptions that underlie the actions of individuals and groups. By making the reasoning behind actions explicit, action science seeks to differentiate between actions that promote or inhibit learning. Learning can be transformational when the relationship between actions and the values on which they are based are examined in an open manner.

The model of action science can be summarized as “values and beliefs lead to action strategies which have consequences” (Watkins & Shindell, 1994, p. 44). The focus of action science is the dialogue between individuals and within groups. An examination of the dialogue reveals tacit theories-in-use – what individuals actually say and do – often in contrast to their espoused theories – what they say they do (Argyris, 1982). The purpose is to uncover the tacit assumptions behind the dialogue to help individuals discover how they have constructed their own meanings. Examining defensive routines that individuals use to deal with difficult situations allows the relationship of values, actions, and consequences of the actions to be analyzed, inconsistencies identified, and changes made to promote learning.

Changes may occur as either single or double loop learning (Argyris, 1982). In single loop or Model I learning, actions are incremental or adaptive, taken with little effort to test ideas or seek feedback. Double loop or Model II learning is transformational. It encourages advocacy with inquiry to produce actions that are based on informed choices and valid information with commitment from everyone, resulting in shared power. Dialogue is reframed to produce knowledge for change. Through critical reflection, theories-in-use are challenged and underlying values transformed. The goal is to achieve “communicative competence,” which Habermas (1984) defined as the ability “to put forward an assertion . . . provide grounds for it by pointing to appropriate evidence” (p. 15) in order to determine the validity of the action.

Does action science meet these standards of critical discourse? What are the similarities between Model II and transformative learning? Does action science provide a set of strategies to encourage transformative learning? This session invites discussion from participants about how action science fits their understandings of the nature of transformative learning. It begins with a brief overview of the theory of action science, tools used in practice, and examples of its use in theory and practice. Drawing on work with individuals and organizations, Watkins and Milton provide a framework for comparison of reflective and transformative learning with learning through action science, share examples of how it has been used to research transformative change, including an excerpt of a case study of an organizational intervention illustrating action science as transformational learning.

Argyris, C. (1982). *Reasoning, learning, and action: Individual and organizational*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action: Vol. I. Reason and the rationalization of society* (Thomas McCarthy, Trans.). Boston: Beacon. (Original work published 1981)

Watkins, K. E., & Shindell, T. J. (1994). Learning and transforming through action science. In A. Brooks & K. E. Watkins (Eds.), *The emerging power of action inquiry technologies* (pp. 43-55). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

## **Wisdom and Knowledge – Lessons of Transformation from the Examination of the Life Histories of Five Diverse Elderly Women**

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Longevity...a drudgery or a dream? As life expectancy increases, what transformational learning lessons can come from an examination of the life stories of those who are aging vibrantly, i.e., maintaining their independence and zest for life well into their seventh and eighth decades? Are there common themes to be examined among diverse groups of vibrantly aging people? What role does transformation have in vibrant aging? These questions propelled me to conduct a study of a diverse group of five older American women (ranging in age from early 70's to mid-80's), self-identified as aging vibrantly, who were willing to re-tell the transformational stories and experiences that they believe have placed them on the path of a vibrant old age.

Using narrative inquiry as a research methodology, two or three interviews of ninety or more minutes were conducted with each participant in a relaxed, conversational, open-ended manner. All of the women were enthusiastic about the process and willing to recount extremely personal tales of triumphs and tragedies. Each interview was poignantly peppered with understanding, laughter and sometimes tears. It has been said that "eagerness to tell one's story signals a desire to live" (Bruner, 1999, p. 9). As each participant drilled down further and further into her life history, her zest for life, past, present and future, became increasingly apparent. These deeply personal interviews provoked critical reflection among each of the participants which contributed to deeper and more meaningful probing and informative discussions of each participant's transformational experiences as the research continued. Each of the participants broadened her perspective from the examination of her life and I, as the researcher, was enlightened by the research results.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded to identify themes. Through the group was diverse in terms of ethnicity, economic station, educational background and race, the research revealed a number of themes, among them motivation spurred by the pursuit of a passion; positive responses to the challenges of life; adaptability; and, in some cases transformative experiences. Additionally, each of the women shared a commitment to lifelong learning which has enabled her to explore interests further and deeper, to expand knowledge and to develop new skills. Each of them continues to see each new day as one that will present learning and growth opportunities.

The study resulting in the weaving of an intricate and vivid tapestry of the individual women – transformational survival tales that may provide educators and lay people alike with valuable knowledge as to the impact of transformative learning on achieving vibrant aging.

## **Transdisciplinary Transformation**

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In this conversation, I am eager to share another school of thought about transdisciplinary, one that positions it beyond interdisciplinary. For clarification, while interdisciplinarity removes the boundaries among disciplines within the academy (*disciplinary interface*), transdisciplinarity removes the boundaries between the academy and civil society (*academy-society interface*). While interdisciplinarity solves complicated problems using synergy created by weaving together various disciplinary insights, transdisciplinarity addresses the complex, emergent problems of humanity by creating new knowledge within an evolving, chaotic (in a good way) network of relationships, in-formation creation, and problem solving.

Transdisciplinary studies explicitly destabilize disciplinary boundaries while fully respecting the need for disciplinary expertise. This form of scholarship entails three key concepts: (a) transformative praxis, (b) constructive insights problem posing and solving, and (c) engagement with the real world, people actually living the problems. Their insights are as valuable as or more so than those stemming from the collection of disciplines in the academy. At the same time that disciplinary boundaries are blurring and being destabilized, there is a concerted effort to foster collaboration across academic disciplines that includes non-academics in solving problems and addressing global issues (called civil society). This is what is meant by an academy-society interface.

Transdisciplinarity is considered to be a new methodology in its own right (supplanting the familiar Newtonian (scientific), interpretive and critical methodologies). It is informed by four axioms: complexity and emergence (*epistemology/knowledge*), multiple levels of *reality* (*ontology*), the *logic* of the included middle, and integral *value* constellations (axiology).

An integral part of my conversation will be how scholarship in the academy will have to transform if it embraces transdisciplinarity. Here is just a sampling: (a) the knowledge created in context (in the real world) belongs to everyone not to one discipline; (b) the context where the new knowledge will be applied is key, not the agenda of the disciplinary homes of the scholars; (c) to wit, scholars have to shift from reliable and valid robust knowledge to social robust knowledge; (d) the disciplinary imperative has to be set aside to create a voice for those working in other types of organizations; (e) academics have to accept they are transient, with one foot in their academic home and the other entangled in the web of societal relationships, always roaming; (f) and, they can no longer wear the mantle of founding father of knowledge because all knowledge is created in the collective, is embodied knowledge, alive because the problems are alive. Intellectual fusion happens in the fertile space between disciplines and civil society-this is where new ideas take root and grow- phenomenal transformative learning and societal transformation occurs.

## **Mindful Leadership for a Multicultural World**

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In our work as intercultural leadership coaches, we work with highly interculturally-competent global leaders who demonstrate the competencies to deal effectively with a complex situation of uncertainty and potential conflict. To measure intercultural competence, we use Mitch Hammer's Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a statistically reliable, cross-culturally valid assessment tool. According to Hammer, the stage of 'Adaptation' - representing the highest level of intercultural competence on the IDI - involves the capability of shifting perspective to another culture and adapting behavior according to cultural context. In our work, we observed individuals in 'Adaptation' sometimes making the choice to act against what they know to be culturally effective and appropriate behavior and not flexing their style. What would drive an experienced global leader who is conscious of the consequences of 'non-compliance' to choose an action that might cause misunderstanding, or even conflict? For her coach, what would be the right action to take so that she can move into a clear space? We define this type of advanced intercultural competence as 'Selective Adaptability' and want to discuss how 'Mindful Leadership' tools can help transform its challenges into potential for transformative learning.

Mindful leadership' is about integrating our personal mindfulness practices with whole-body leadership development approaches with the goal of making us more comfortable with being the eye of the storm. 'Mindful leadership' is accessing our capacity for paradox – or tolerance of ambiguity – to reach a deeper level of self-awareness for non-reactive and more informed decision-making. It is a synergistic full-competence development, wisdom traditions, yoga, non-violent communication, leadership development theories and 'Personal Leadership'. 'Personal Leadership' (Schaetti, Ramsey, Wantanabe) offers a useful tool called 'Critical Moment Dialogue (CMD)' which brings all three dimensions of Mezirow's Perspective Transformation into action, psychological, convictional and behavioral, and leads to a shift of perspective.

As intercultural leadership coaches, we find it useful to offer 'Mindful Leadership' tools to an individual who consciously chooses 'Selective Adaptability' and, as a result, feels frustrated, angry or confused. As mentioned above, intercultural competence can be at an advanced stage and a, at the same time, not be utilized if we don't acknowledge our capacity. Capacity is spacious, a space within us. If capacity is not given voice to, if it is not being communicated, we might opt not to access our competencies. An unheard capacity can be unattended emotions and physical sensations, unmet needs, attachment to knowing and a busy mind. An unheard capacity might look like incompetence. 'Mindful Leadership' practices create the space for capacity.

Mindful Leadership' begins with measuring the level of intercultural competence with the IDI, recognizing the potential for creativity and growth of leveraging differences, engaging in self-reflection through the CMD, and then sustaining it through practices that strengthen mindfulness. With this process, we can help highly adaptable global leaders and individuals dealing with the uncertainties of a multicultural world mindfully and effectively select if and when to adapt.