

# Collective Wisdom Through Small Group Engagement

In-depth for KA 703: Systems, Society, Culture and  
Community

Assessor: Dr. Katrina Rogers

January 6, 2007  
*Revised March 22, 2007*

Lyn Hartley ([lyn@northwestel.net](mailto:lyn@northwestel.net))  
#1 Tanglewood Trail  
Lewes Lake, Yukon  
867.456.2737  
skype: lynhartley

## **Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement**

December 14, 2006

Lyn Hartley ([lyn@northwestel.net](mailto:lyn@northwestel.net))

In my first essay, I explored recent innovations in using large group processes to engage systems. Many of these approaches are based on the premise of bringing the whole system into the room in order to incorporate a multitude of perspectives and create robust solutions (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995). When first introduced, the large group interventions presented a dramatic shift from traditional hierarchical approach to focus on interconnections and how people could enhance working together. While there are many advantages to harvesting system-wide knowledge, large groups make it more difficult to create intimate space where people feel comfortable.

Bunker and Alban (1997) identify the psychology of large groups is a challenge for creating spaces in which people feel safe and uninhibited to speak their minds. Participants need adequate space and airtime in order to be involved in the process. Through speaking their minds, people individuate and receive recognition. Often, participants become very vocal or very quiet and there is less “diffusion of responsibility” (p. 203) in the group. Facilitators or explicit instructions are critical for ensuring everyone gets a chance to speak and share accountability. However, sometimes it may be more appropriate to use a small group and work at the grassroots level, from the bottom up.

In this second essay, I will approach system engagement from the other end of the spectrum: how can small groups be used to create change? While the first essay explored the recent

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

innovations for working with large groups, a common feature to both small and large group engagement is effective dialogue. At the heart of this essay is the topic of dialogue and an exploration how individuals communicate in meaningful ways. The first part of the essay will explore the nature of dialogue in the context of working with adult learners, while the second part will investigate how the Ginger Group engages in an approach they describe as “collaborative inquiry.”

Personally, dialogue is of great interest to me. As an independent educator and facilitator in the Yukon, most of my work involves creating space for adults to learn. The majority of this work is with groups and I want to find new ways to use dialogue and inquiry to tap into collective wisdom.

### **What is dialogue?**

The word dialogue stems from the Greek word referring to how meaning flows through (dia = through and logos = meaning) (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 19) or the meaning of the word (Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1991).

Since ancient times, dialogue has been an essential element to engaging adults in learning. Some of the earliest recorded dialogues date back to the Greek philosopher Plato, as he recorded several intellectual conversations with his teacher Socrates. Dating between 427 BC - 347 BC, these conversations, using the approach referred to as the Socratic method and are known as the Platonic Dialogues (Smith, 2005). The style of these dialogues was instructional in that the seeker would ask the expert questions and in the process become

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

aware of their argument's limitations. This dialectic method emphasizes the collective over the individual and enables people to expand their narrow vision of the truth.

In more recent times, the American organization the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) has documented the use of dialogue and fostering conversation. In a working document prepared for their most recent annual conference, the NCDD identified the various streams of dialogic and deliberative practice (National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, 2002). NCDD started with the categories described by Zuniga and Biren (2001): collective inquiry; community building and social action; conflict transformation and peace building; and critical-dialogic education. To this list, NCDD added deliberative democracy, online dialogue and deliberation and arts-based dialogue.

Arts-based civic dialogue uses the arts to engage citizens about contemporary issues. In this approach, the arts such as painting or movement is used to bring in other ways of knowing beyond rational approaches. Collective inquiry is based on Bohm's work and encourages people to find common meaning by suspending personal judgments and assumptions. With collective inquiry, groups gather around a topic and try to listen deeply to each other without passing judgment. Ellinor & Gerard (1998) and Isaacs (1999b) continue to expand this stream. Community building and social action dialogue tackles contentious community issues (i.e. racism and inequities). The intent of this stream is to bring about societal change through talking about issues impacting community such as injustice or discrimination.

Conflict transformation and peace building takes a conflict mediation method as a way to build understanding amongst conflicting groups. Usually, there is tension and groups use dialogue as a bridge to understand each other interests. Critical-dialogic education, building

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

on Freire's liberatory education (1971), emerged in colleagues as a way explore social inequities and systemic change. Freire used dialogue as a way of helping people see how societal structures suppress their opportunity for development; Freire's unique contribution and approach will be documented later in this essay. Deliberative democracy encourages citizens to consider public challenges together as a means of participating in democracy. Through dialogue, people are encouraged to actively engage in their political systems and provide politicians with their opinions about what is needed. And finally, online dialogue and deliberation uses technology to engage people through online discussions over the Internet.

At the 2002 NNCD conference, the 225 registrants were polled about how they would define their sector of practice and the following areas were identified: Community Building and Social Action sector (62%) Conflict Transformation and Peace-Building (53%), Deliberative Democracy (41%), Collective Inquiry (30%), Critical-Dialogic Education (28%) Online Dialogue & Deliberation (14%).

### **Dialogue in Adult Learning**

While Plato and Socrates may have shared rich debates and dialogues, that is not the case for most North American adult learners. Due to class size and limited access to teachers, most post-secondary education involves delivery of lectures and presentations rather than engaging in critical dialogue.

The Brazilian educationalist Freire (1971), was one of the earlier theorists to challenge the ways that the education system neglected adult learning, particularly basic needs such as

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

literacy. The lynchpin of his approach was the use of critical conversation: “dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (p. 88). Freire believed that education needed to focus on dialogue rather than highly structured curriculum. A symbiotic relationship is created between the learner and the educator that hinges on mutual respect and working collaboratively. Dialogue becomes a means of building social capital and giving voice to the people that typically do not have a voice. Education needs to involve the lived experience of the learner as a means for making learning meaningful. In 1970’s, Freire’s theory took the world by storm and while it remains to be a cornerstone of adult learning, many of his dialogical approaches were not continued, possibly due to burgeoning class sizes and costs of education.

While a dialogical approach incorporates a learners experience with other perspectives and new material, it certainly takes more time than the standard banking system of education opposed by Freire. However, educators have generally agreed that use of dialogue is a central technique for helping learners create meaning and deepen their comprehension of concepts.

In recent years there has been a renaissance in dialogical approaches as a means for engaging adult learners, particularly in the fields of transformative learning and organizational development. Perhaps the greatest impetus for the rise in dialogue is that within adult learning theory, transformative learning has dominated the field. A keystone of creating transformative learning experience in the classroom is the use of dialogue for people to compare their thinking with others ( Mezirow, 1991).

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

Grandfather of transformative learning theory, Jack Mezirow (2003) believes that group communication is critical for transformative learning. It is through sharing perspectives that people are able to understand their assumptions and frames of reference that they may otherwise take for granted. Mezirow describes this as approach as discourse: “discourse here refers to dialogue involving the assessment of beliefs, feelings and values.” In order for adults to participate in such discourse requires people to be “critically self-reflective” (p. 60) and possess “reflective judgment” (p. 60).

To foster the ability to reason in adulthood, the adult educator must help learners acquire the skills, sensitivities, and understandings essential to become critically reflective of assumptions and to participate more fully and freely in critical-dialectical discourse. Although the educator helps the learner assess and achieve the learner’s objective, the professional goal of the educator is to foster the learner’s skills, habit of mind, disposition, and will to become more active and rational learner. This involves becoming more critically reflective of assumptions supporting one’s own beliefs and those of others and more discriminating, open, and disposed to transformative learning. (p. 62)

Building on Mezirow’s suggestion that educators need to find ways to help learners understand their “habits of mind” and critically reflect, there has been a shift towards a contemplative approach to education. Contemplative practices involve reflecting and developing awareness of the self, often lead to shifts in how people see themselves and the world. Hart (2004) explores this contemplative approach and the possibility of deep listening and awareness of self. The contemplative approach is another way of knowing that builds on the rational and sensory “designed to quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration and insight” (Hart, 2004, p. 29). Contemplative practices then are a natural way of unearthing and critically assessing assumptions, ultimately creating an opportunity for perspective transformation.

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

Vella (2002) developed the concept of dialogue education that provides a specific framework for encouraging participatory learning with adults. Rather than focusing on the instructor's knowledge, the focus shifts to encouraging learners to consider the application of the ideas and the personal significance to their own contexts: "adults have enough life experience to be in dialogue with any teacher about any subject and will learn new knowledge, attitudes, or skills best in relation to that experience" (p. 3). Vella believes that dialogue is critical to creating relationships in a quantum world: "dialogue does not serve those who see human beings as machines in a mechanistic universe" (p. 27).

Most recently, Wilhelmson (2006) has researched how dialogue can be used in non-formal education. Wilhelmson articulated that "dialogue competence needs to be cultivated," (p. 254) as not all adults have the same skill level. Within organizations, Wilhelmson discovered that management needs to work on their listening while their staff needs to develop their ability to speak assertively; both need to develop their ability to self-reflect. Given some training in dialogue, members were more likely to have a transformative shift in the learning, either for themselves or for the collective group.

### **Three Intellectual Traditions of Dialogue**

While adult education may have a renewed interest in dialogue, the field of organizational development has taken a similar interest. To understand dialogue in organizational development, it is important to examine the scholarly lineages that have evolved, particularly in the area of communication. Pearce (2004b) suggests that for dialogue, there are three major intellectual theorists that created dialogical traditions with distinct underlying assumptions: Bohm, Bakhtin and Buber.

Bohmian dialogue is an opportunity for collective thinking through awareness and suspension of assumptions. Bakhtinian considers all conversations to be dialogic even if people are not aware; through dialogue we construct our identity and reality (Barge and Little). And finally with a Buberian approach, the focus is on the interpersonal relationship; dialogue is a transformative experience. According to Pearce, Bakhtin's work is most common to the academic community while organizational development consultants have pursued the Bohmian tradition. Barge and Little (2002) offer an alternative to Bohm based on the dialogical work of Bakhtin. Opposed to the Bohmian view that dialogue rarely happens, the Bakhtian perspective views dialogue as an everyday practice:

We suggest that the work of Mikhail Bakhtin provides an alternative way to view dialogue within organizational life. From this perspective, all conversation is dialogic and involves the interrelatedness of both self and *Other* in language and in being. The focus of dialogic practice moves from being focused on collective thinking toward being concerned with how to manage centripetal and centrifugal forces during conversation. p. 395

The Buberian tradition underpins much of the approach taken in education, including the noted pedagogist, Freire. Buber's work has been further developed by the Public Dialogue Consortium and Pearce's approach of Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce, 2004a). Due to the interest in both the popular and academic literature, this essay will largely focus on Bohmian dialogue.

### **Bohmian Dialogue**

Bohm, a theoretical physicist noted for his work on the Manhattan Project, quantum theory and relativity, spent the later part of his career working on understanding dialogue. His

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

interest in the quantum level flavored his worldview in that he viewed reality as the unbroken wholeness in flowing movement. Bohm also had interest in spiritual wisdom and had an interesting exploration with Jidhu Krishnamurti investigating the nature of the human mind. While Bohm drew from both scientific and spiritual traditions, it was clear that he believed that dialogue was a way for society to get to the root of the human suffering in the world:

In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing dance or play together with little difficulty but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariable to lead to dispute, division and often to violence. In our view this condition points to a deep and pervasive defect in the process of human thought. (Bohm et al., 1991)

For Bohm, the purpose of dialogue is to reveal the "pervasive incoherence in the process of human thought" (Bohm et al., 1991). His technique often referred as Bohmian Dialogue, focuses on the stream of meaning between people so that new understandings emerged. It is these shared meanings that bring not only groups, but also society together.

Within this tradition, a dialogue is held in groups of 10-40 people sitting in a circle (Bohm et al., 1991). There is no agenda for the meeting and participants are encouraged to suspend their thoughts and find ways to think together:

Dialogue is a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behavior, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. It can therefore be seen as an arena in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can arise. (Bohm et al., 1991, ¶ 3.)

Working with Peter Garrett and Donald Factor, Bohm refined his approach with groups that involved examining their preconceptions and patterns of thoughts. Bohm believed that dialogue was a way to investigate fragmentation and how people isolate themselves.

Bohm identifies three conditions for dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Senge, 1994, p. 243). Firstly,

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

participants must learn to suspend their assumptions rather than engage in discussions or negotiations. Participants are encouraged to hang onto their opinions and really listen to other people's thoughts. An open or empty space is needed to allow dialogue to flow. Secondly, all participants must be regarded as equal. Sometimes this can be challenging as most of our North American organizations are built around hierarchy. However, hierarchy and authority can quickly shut down conversation. Thirdly, a facilitator is needed initially to hold the space for the dialogue. Initially, people new to the dialogue process need assistance in the process and a skilled facilitator can be a guide. The intent of the dialogue is to speak frankly with awareness of personal opinion and the underlying values.

Clearly, Bohm believed that humans needed to become more observant of their own thought processes as thoughts shape reality. Dialogue is an opportunity to create a common understanding that was greater than the sum of individuals present.

### **Senge's Popularization of Bohmian Dialogue**

While the benefits of dialogic engagement was acknowledged in academic circles, Bohm's unique approach to dialogue was popularized in Senge's book *Fifth Discipline* (1994) as a critical technique for creating learning organizations and engaging teams. Senge describes learning organizations as places "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (p. 3). Senge's initial writing on the capabilities required for a learning organization included a set of practices for generative conversations:

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

Language functions as a device for connection, invention and coordination. People can talk from their hearts and connect with one another in the spirit of dialogue (from the Greek dial + logs – moving through). Their dialogue weaves a common ongoing fabric and connects them at a deep level of being. When people talk and listen to each other this way, they create a field of alignment that produces tremendous power to invest in new realities in conversation, and to bring about these new realities in action. (Kofman & Senge, 1993, p. 16)

While Senge drew heavily on Bohm's work, he did not expand his thinking other than advocate the use of dialogue in organizations and with teams as a means to access collective wisdom as the "larger pool of meaning accessible to a group". Dialogue is then a practical way for organizations to reflect and tap into the wisdom of the group: dialogue that is grounded in reflection and inquiry skills is likely to be more reliable and less dependent on particulars of circumstance, such as the chemistry among team members" (Senge, 1994, 249). Senge's approach to organizational learning was a significant shift away from the focus in organizational development on individuals or charismatic leaders.

### **MIT Dialogue Project**

Though Senge may have not advanced Bohm's thinking on dialogue, the attention he drew to concepts paved the way for the financing a two-year MIT Dialogue Project, lead by Bill Isaacs. The purpose of the MIT Dialogue Project was to build a practical theory of dialogue and resulted in Isaacs' seminal book *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (Isaacs, 1999b).

Drawing significantly from Bohm's thinking on dialogue, Issacs' defines dialogue as:

a conversation with a center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before.

It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups and people.

(Isaacs, 1999b, p. 19)

The MIT Dialogue Project conducted action research on dialogue in organization in search of practical applications. Just like a cauldron holds hot metal, a key element of Isaacs model is the importance of a container to hold a dialogue. The central purpose of a dialogue is “to establish a field of genuine meeting and inquiry (which we call a container) – a setting in which people can allow a free flow of meaning and vigorous exploration of the collective background of their thought, their personal predispositions, the nature of their shared attention, and the rigid features of their individual and collective assumptions.” (Isaacs, 1996, p. 25)

Generally, container moves through four evolutions or stages that Isaacs refers to as fields. At the start, the container is unstable as there is little trust or safety amongst participants (p. 257). Generally people are polite, as they don't really know each other. Next, there is usually conflict and struggle as individuals clash over their personal beliefs (p. 265). If participants are willing to suspend some of their thinking, there can be inquiry within the container as people investigate what leads to their polarization and fragmentation (p. 272). Finally, it is possible for people to experience creativity in the container as collective perceptions are realized and the conversation turns to generative thinking. Curiosity is strong as people are willing to admit that they don't really understand and through mutual discovery, larger meaning unfolds (p. 272).

Just as Bohm suggested, key throughout this process is vigilant attention to one's mind and

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

it's arising assumptions: "the mindfulness embodied in the dialogue involves awareness of the living experience of thinking, not reflection after the fact about it." (p. 31). The orientation is in the present with a purpose of creating "a setting where conscious collective mindfulness can be maintained" (p. 31). Isaacs offer the following guidelines for dialogue: 'suspend assumptions and certainties; observe the observer; listen to your listening; slow down the inquiry; be aware of thought; and befriend polarization" (Isaacs, 1996, p. 33).

One of the most interesting perspectives that I read about Bohmian Dialogue came from Schein (1993), noted organizational culture theorist. Schein had the opportunity to work as a facilitator within the Dialogue Project and he blends his own theory with observations from this process. Schein is a strong supporter of organizational dialogue as a means of organizational transformation:

If we did not need to communicate in groups, then we would not need to work on dialogue. But if problem and conflict resolution in groups is increasingly important in our complex world, then the skill of dialogue becomes one of the most fundamental of human skills.

And while dialogue is an essential skill, Schein suggests that much of our conversation has been plagued with "mutual maintenance of face" (p. 28) in which we create our own defensive routines and attempt to cover our true feelings in an effort to protect other's self-worth. Dialogue is a way to formalize debate and safely investigate what is on our minds. There is a difference between dialogue and sensitivity training as the former emphasizes underlying assumptions and generative thinking the later emphasizes communication and

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

interpersonal skills and feedback. Schein emphasizes the importance of critical reflection about our perceptions in the moment: “we have to learn to listen to ourselves before we can really understand others” (p. 33). This is what Bohm defined as proprioception and Isaacs described as attention to and living in the moment.

Isaacs (1999a) also presents the role of leadership in dialogue through a four player model of conversation in which the process is dependent on fair play of all: without movers there is no direction; without followers there is no completion, without opposers there is no correction; and without bystanders there is no perspective. Building on Argyris and Schon’s work (1978), Isaac’s believes that there needs to be a balance between advocacy from the movers and opposers with inquiry from the bystanders and followers: “to advocate well, you must move and oppose well; to inquire, you must stand by and follow. Yet again, the absence of any of the elements hinders interaction” (p. 3). To enhance dialogue quality, Isaacs suggests four practices for each of the roles: “speaking your true voice and encouraging others to do the same; listening as a participant; respecting the coherence of others’ views and suspending your certainties (p. 4).

### **Generative Dialogue**

Scharmer, a colleague of Isaacs at MIT assisted in developing the four fields of generative dialogue previously described. Scharmer (2000) further developed this theory of generative dialogue, detailing how a conversation moves from "talking nice" to "talking tough" before entering into “reflective dialogue” or ultimately “generative dialogue” (p. 34). Scharmer outlines the types of communication practices that occur in each field. If conversation is able to shift into a generative space, people operate from the larger whole: “while it happens,

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

the experience of time slows down, and the speech acts change from speaking based on reflecting to speaking from what emerges in the here and now” ( p. 36).

As part of his own research on leadership, Scharmer interviewed Francisco Varela, a Chilean biologist and philosopher best known for his concept of autopoiesis. Varela’s thinking on “three gestures of awareness” (p. 2) had a profound impact on Scharmer’s thinking: “these three gestures, which describe the core process of becoming aware are suspension, redirection and letting go” (Scharmer, 2004a, p. 2). Suspension is about noticing habits of judgment: “unless you suspend, you will not see” (p. 7). Redirection is about shifting the frame of reference and our attention as “we move from observing to enacting” (p. 8). Letting go, the willingness to move past our fix identities to what Varela refers to as “letting come” (p. 10). For Scharmer, it is this last stage that is most critical:

For me, the genius of Varela was to describe these turning points of letting go, which he called suspension of judgment, redirection of our intention and letting go of our old identities. When we do this, we transform the social field from judgmental habits of thought towards inquiry and accessing the not-knowing mind. According to Humberto Maturana, this is also where we access the only emotion that enhances our intelligence – appreciation and love.

This is what we must do to access this deeper source from where we can begin to operate, in order to move toward letting-come and to wake up to our true Self an Work. We must let go in order to bring forth the emerging reality that is wanting to come into the world through us. (Scharmer, 2004a, p. 11)

Scharmer and Jaworski developed the “U process” or “Theory U” based on over 150 interviews from leading thinkers from around the world. The U process was detailed in the collaborative book, “*Presence*” with Senge, Jaworski and Flowers (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). Scharmer describes presencing as a social technology for illuminating leader's blind spots:

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

The blind spot is the place within or around us where our attention and intention originates. It's the place from where we operate when we do something. The reason it's blind, is because it is an invisible dimension of our social field, our everyday experience in social interactions. (Scharmer, 2006, p. 4)

Rather than learning from the past, Scharmer (2006) believes that leaders need to understand the emergent future: "presencing is a blend of two words "presence" and "sensing". It means to sense, tune in and act from one's highest future potential - the future that depends on us to bring it into being." (p. 5)

There are three main movements within the U process (Hassan & Kahane, 2005):

1. Sensing: gathering information about the current reality of a system. A key aspect is using dialogue interviewing to understand the systemic issues.
2. Presencing: settling into a place of not knowing and letting go of previous knowledge. Often this is done in silence in order to really listen and access a deeper wisdom.
3. Realizing: swift action to create a new reality through prototyping, piloting and institutionalizing.

The Change Lab was developed by Generon Consulting as a means for bringing together many stakeholders and applying Theory U to complex issues. The aim of the process is to gather collective insight about systemic problems without easy answers (Hassan & Kahane, 2005). Along with Theory U, the Change Lab blends Adam Kahane's (2004) experience in working with tough problems: "we have to bring together the people who are co-creating the current reality to co-create new realities. We have to shift from downloading and

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

debating to reflective and generative dialogue. We have to choose an open way over a closed way” (p. 129).

For the past several years, Generon has designed change labs in which a group of stakeholders, representing a microcosm of the complex issue, are gathered to think through the various stages of the U. Change Labs tackle the complex by looking systemically, generatively and socially. No single entity owns the problem and creative solutions are needed. While the process is a dynamic way to work across boundaries, it takes not only willingness, but also a lot of time and money. It is also vital to get a true microcosm of the system to ensure diversity.

Fortunately, I have had a first-hand experience of this process as for the past two years, Adam Kahane and a team from Generon has hosted Change Labs at the Shambhala Institute. This past year, the team examined the health care system in Nova Scotia. Working in small teams, groups visited several aspects of the health care system such as hospitals, health care advocates, medical associations and nursing homes. On these visits, the teams interviewed people about their perspective about what was happening. The group then returned to the Institute and shared key pieces of their interviews to get a sense of the larger system. What was different about the approach was that this group of “outsiders” spent time watching and gathering information before leaping to recommendations about what needed to happen. Traditionally, consultants are problem solvers that need to come up with doable solutions. This approach takes much more time in systematically collecting information about the situation before settling into a place of not knowing. However, once the group is able to let go of what they think should happen, they enter into a collective spot

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

of thinking together and new ideas may emerge. At that point, the process picks up speed as ideas can be prototyped and ultimately institutionalized if successful. While there was not really enough time to truly sink into the U at the Shambhala Institute, the participants seem to be very moved by the process and emerge with expanded vision of the complexity.

### **Meditative Mind**

Understanding the developments with dialogue has given me a new perspective on the opportunity to combine mindfulness with conversation. While I was intrigued to read about Bohm's approach, it also seemed to be very cerebral, as if the mind was cut-off from the rest of the body. Gunnlaugson remarks that Bohmian dialogue leaves groups "prone to abstract and idiosyncratic forms of contemplation," resulting in "obscure philosophizing as individuals get tangled up in their meta-processes" (Gunnlaugson, 2006, p. 6).

Through the Dialogue Project, Isaac attempted to bridge the gap between action and reflection: "often the claim is made that the difficulty in making dialogue more concrete or actionable is inherent in the nature of the phenomenon itself - that dialogue cannot be "willed," that it is a process that questions the instrumental rationality which arises from the subject-object Cartesian split"(Isaacs, 2001).

The aspect of the MIT Dialogue Project and Generative Dialogue that interests me the most is the aspect of observing the mind and the transformation from individual to collective thinking. Bohm notes that awareness of assumptions and thought process in the moment is not an easy task:

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

To suspend thought, impulse, judgment, etc. requires serious attention to the overall process we have been considering – both on one's own and within a group. This involves what may at first appear to be an arduous kind of work. But if this work is sustained, one's ability to give such attention constantly develops so that less and less effort is required. (Bohm et al., 1991)

Jaworksi suggests that meditation offers one of the most dynamic ways to study the mind: "I am convinced that meditation is a key element of the capacity building of the future. One effect of meditation is to calm and still the mind, and to help a person be more stable. But the second effect is developing the capacity to drop underneath the chaos of surface reality and see a more enduring, generative reality. I want to do a lot more work on that (Scharmer, 1999, p. 24).

The result of generative dialogue is the ability to move into a higher self that is not ego driven. Isaacs believes that dialogue is a way to demonstrate our genuine voice and "lift us out of ourselves" (Isaacs, 1999a). At the deeper level of dialogue, a richness of conscious meaning creates what Isaacs deems a metalogue: "a metalogue reveals a conscious, intimate, and subtle relationship between the structure and content of an exchange and its meaning. The medium and the messages are linked: information from the process conveys as much meaning as the content of the words exchanged. The group does not have meaning, in other words, it is meaning." (Isaacs, 1996, p. 38). Kofman and Senge remind us about the memory of the whole:

Building learning organizations is not an individual task. It demands a shift that goes all the way to the core of our culture. We have drifted into a culture that fragments our thoughts, that detaches the world from the self and the self from its community." (Kofman & Senge, 1993, p. 22)

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

While the process of developing Bohmian dialogue has been well documented, I note that it was dominated by masculine approaches and male academics. In the last part of my in-depth, I will explore alternative ways to engaging in dialogue based on my own journey with a community of practice.

### **Learning in Community**

For the past 15 years, I have been working largely in isolation, in small Northern Canadian communities. Starting out as a biologist, I had no plans about becoming a facilitator. Yet my path led me to this place of working with my own species; it is a place of great vocational enjoyment and satisfaction.

One of my challenges is that I often work alone and have few colleagues to share challenges or successes. I longed for a sense of community to learn and share with. Fortunately, I found some of this community in the annual summer institute of the Shambhala Institute. But more importantly, it was at the Institute that I first heard about a group called the Ginger Collaborative. Though I didn't know much about them, I knew they worked as a community of practice – individuals that come together to learn and support each other. In this next section, I will explore communities of practice and the collaborative inquiry processes.

### **What are Communities of Practice (CoP)?**

Contrary to popular opinion, Seely Brown and Duguid (1991) claim that people do not necessarily work as described in their job descriptions or organizational charts. People tend

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

to work and learn more informally in what they describe as a "community-of-practices."

Seely Brown and Duguid were some of the first organizational theorists to encourage the formation of communities within an organization. Communities of practice provide a vital link for information that allows innovation to flow throughout an organization.

Most of western education focuses on the role of the individual and views the learning as an isolated event from the rest of our lives. While studying apprenticeship programs, Lave and Wenger (1991) challenged this concept with their model of situated learning that involves learning as a social practice through deep engagement in a "community of practice" (CoP). An apprentice experiences a living curriculum through a complex set of social relationships and learning. They suggest that throughout our lives, we are constantly involved and learning in a variety of groups for work, pleasure, home and civic responsibilities:

Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities, *communities of practice*. (Wenger 1998: 45).

Werner (2006) defines communities of practice as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

Wenger uses three dimensions to define communities of practice: what it is about (the domain); how it functions (the community); what capability it produces (the practice).

Within a CoP, the shared domain is constantly negotiated by mutual engagement. Over time, the group creates a shared culture or repertoire of communal resources. What is most important, are the relationships that are formed and the learning through doing. As the group develops, it can take on more complex activities and in doing so, develops trust. Rather than developing the mind through information, the social interaction is the key:

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

“rather than asking what kind of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place” (1991: 14).

One of the most intriguing articles that I read about working together in groups was by jazz musician and Fielding faculty member, Frank Barrett (Barrett, 1998). Barrett explored the implications for improvisation for organizational learning. Barrett himself, learned to play with some of the Jazz greats such as Buddy Morrow and the Tommy Dorsey Band.

Learning to improvise takes time, as jazz is built on a common vocabulary of phrases and patterns that need to be mastered. Transformation happens when a musician has a total grasp of the basics and starts to export selections and combine elements in their own unique way. However, “too much reliance on learned patterns (habitual or automatic thinking) tends to limit the risk-taking necessary for creative improvisation” (p. 607). Barrett claims that musicians have to “suspend some degree of control and surrender to the flow of the music” (p. 607).

Barrett suggests that to learn a culture, new musicians watch the established members, hear their stories and ask questions about how things are done. Lave and Wenger also suggest that learning is specific to the social situation; a CoP is often used as way of indoctrinating new people into the culture:

Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and... the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills.

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

(Lave and Wenger 1991: 29)

Contrary to the solitary approach of individual learning that is practiced in North America, learning is about creation of relationships and collective knowledge:

Learning traditionally gets measured as on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads... [Here] learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part. (McDermott cited in Murphy 1999:17)

Por (2006), another advocate of communities of practices believes that the aim of on-going relationships is the opportunity to harvest collective intelligence:

Collective intelligence is the capacity of human communities to evolve towards higher order complexity and harmony, through such innovation mechanisms as differentiation and integration, competition and collaboration. (Por, 2006)

With communities of practice over time, there is a shifting intelligence from the individual to the whole of the group. The relationship between individual transformation and group consciousness is emerging in the literature.

### **Transformative Learning in Community**

In recent years, transformative learning theory has risen as an important approach to helping individuals surface and challenge their assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). McWhinney and Markos (2003) explore the importance of communities in creating liminal spaces for transformative learning. Drawing upon Turner's descriptions of ritual, they use the word *communitas* to describe the intimate groups of seekers: "such communities are made up of wanderers who seek intimacy with others as they become strangers to themselves. Some mentors would speed up this process by facilitating appropriate dialogue among the participants" (McWhinney & Markos, 2003, p. 26).

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

Kasl and Elias (2000) urge North Americans to shift their epistemic assumption from the individual to the group. While there has been a lot of focus on transformative learning and helping individuals become aware of their perspectives and frames of references, Kasl and Elias believe that transformative learning also happens at a collective level and “the group as an entity learns” (p. 229). Kasl and Elias document how groups socially construct meaning in response to a changing environment and in doing so, develop a new level of consciousness. It is possible for people to create new habits of mind by engaging in a group, as long as there is freedom for individual expression and an awareness of the larger operating framework.

The interest in group consciousness has rekindled attention on Carl R. Roger’s person-centered group process (O’Hara, 2003). In the last 15 years of his work, Rogers shifted from individuals to unstructured person-centered group encounters as a means for social learning. There are many names for these experiential group processes including what Roger’s deemed an encounter group. In the sixties, there was a surge of interest in these approaches as means of creating a safe space for people to reveal their true selves and garner feedback.

O’Hara reports a synergistic creative process was created in these forums:

Extraordinary events occurred in person-centered groups that went beyond individual growth and group dynamic explanatory frames with which we were all familiar. We began to see that although what we were learning about the value of the large group in promoting individual growth and the cultivation of higher order mental capacities was important, experiences occurred in these groups that could not be explained as simply the sum of collective actions. (O’Hara, 2003, p. 72)

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

In the 1980's, the focus shifted away from the group and towards the individual. However, organizational consultants still draw upon the approach and new forms of the group such as “conscious communities or integral groups” are emerging:

When groups can provide the necessary conditions for each of their members to become fully present to themselves and each other, the group's capacity for self-organizing emerges, and when the individuals also begin to tune into and reflect on the workings of the whole, we consider that a form of consciousness. At this stage, the group may become capable of exquisitely creative, responsible, and wise collective action that goes well beyond that of any of the particular individual participants within the group. (O'Hara, 2003, p. 74)

While Dirkx (2006) critiques Mezirow's transformative learning theory for relying on rational knowledge, there is little in the literature about other ways of knowing.

In their case study, Elias and Kals (2000) report on the impact of using multiple ways of knowing in order to tap into intuitive knowledge: “these activities tapped intuitive knowledge and emotional energy that led us to discover difference we had not surfaced in faculty business meeting where analytic discussion and critical reflection were the dominant modes. We also grew in our empathic appreciation of each other” (p. 240).

As the scholarly literature is limited, in order to learn more about collaborative learning and other ways of knowing, I joined with a group of practitioners.

### **The Ginger Group + Collaborative Inquiry**

#### **To Mettle with the Gingers**

Just like a hint of freshly grated root hitting your tongue, the zesty nature of the Gingers, preceded them. Like any group with notoriety, I heard their name many times before I actually met a living and breathing member. Was it a secret society of organizational facilitators with super powers? Whenever someone spoke their name, it was always with a

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

mischievous smile and praise about their ability to learn together. The Ginger's seemed to have superhero status in my mind and I wanted to find out for myself if the rumors about their pluck were true.

I first attended a Ginger Group inquiry in August 2005. The session was held in the basement of a senior's complex in the lush old growth below the University of Victoria. Arriving early, I remember walking into the quiet room and seeing the walls covered with vivid flip charts, stacks of interesting books that I wanted to read and a circle of chairs with an alter of fresh ginger root in the center. While I had little interest in the topic of the inquiry, the draw of the group was strong. Over the next four days, we explored the complex issue of pandemics through multiple ways of knowing. We challenged our own perceptions and language, we called experts from our hometowns and we painted and played together. In the end, I personally came to a deep realization about my own avoidance of death.

The Ginger Group is a collaborative of practitioners from across Canada and Washington State. The group draws inspiration for its organizational structure and approach from its zesty namesake:

Ginger is slang for spirit and "mettle"-to put mettle into. To "ginger up" is to rouse or enliven. Ginger root is a rhizome that has no fixed point and no fixed order. It is composed not of units, but of dimensions, or directions in motion. It has neither a beginning nor an end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows. A "**ginger group**" is a group within a movement or party that presses for stronger policy and action.(Ginger Group Collaborative, 2006)

The Ginger Group Collaborative is a "community of practice". In 2000, three independent organizational consultants (Smith, McLaren and Wright) started the group, as they were interested in learning together as well as exploring collaboration:

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

We were intrigued by the special qualities and challenges of collaborative enterprises and relationships in all their complexity and variations. Through experience, we knew that good planning and visioning was necessary but not sufficient for partnerships to thrive and lead to great outcomes. As solo practitioners, we needed each other's support to dig deeper into the corners of these human systems, to take risks and move beyond our own comfort zones. (Ginger Group Collaborative, 2006)

The purpose of the group is threefold (Ginger Group Collaborative, 2006):

*integrating practice with theory:*

In face-to-face "collaborative inquiries" we bring our own experience, knowledge and enthusiasm to bear upon current theories of organizational change and transformation.

*applying new knowledge to real-life situations:*

We create new approaches, processes and tools for working in complex organizational systems, where working relationships are as important as results. Our approach is one of learning-in-action.

*supporting collaborative leadership:*

We work with organizational leaders to strengthen collaborative skills and orientations, self-awareness, reflective practices, dialogue, conflict resolution

The Gingers try to blend observations from their consulting work with theory and current literature.

inter-personal communication - ideas about "generative" dialogue, active listening and facilitative leadership.

organizational learning and participative processes.

systems thinking - seeing the whole and the parts in an ever-evolving and dynamic system.

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

complexity theory - understanding that organizations and multi-stakeholder entities are "complex adaptive systems" that do not always behave in predictable ways.

integral theory - unifying many ways of knowing and fields of knowledge (biological, cultural, psychological, spiritual). This theory applies to the individual and the collectivity at many different stages of development, in different life conditions over time.

spiral dynamics integral - thinking about complex relationships and structures at all levels and locations. It is a combination of Ken Wilber's integral theory (above) and the original research into human value systems by Clare Graves, and Don Beck. It integrates people's life conditions, values, and decision-making processes.

### **Collaborative Inquiry**

For the past several years, the Gingers have developed an approach to collaborative inquiry and they believe in the lasting benefits of bringing many minds together: “collaboration is, we think, the fabric that underpins thriving communities and great workplaces. Collaboration is not just a passing fad - it is here to stay as a way of achieving something bigger than any individual can achieve on their own” (Ginger Group Collaborative, 2006).

Twice a year, the Ginger Group hosts inquiries in which participants come to explore complex issues. Each inquiry has a different focus and lasts two to three days. Ginger’s describe their collaborative inquiry process as “a meeting place. It is a space that participants create together... a time for reflection, listening, probing, wondering and figuring things out together. It is a collective space where every participant offers their insights, knowledge and expertise... a community of practice. A place to learn.”

## **Gingers and the Art of Collaboration**

As a budding member of the Ginger rhizome, I wanted to learn more about the key influences for the core group members. I view many of the Gingers as my role models for my own personal development as an educator/facilitator as well as a general way of being in the world. Last winter/spring, I sent out a simple questionnaire to find out what were key resources for informing the Gingers.

From the influential resource identified by the participating Ginger members, several frequently mentioned topic areas emerged: dialogue + collective wisdom, spiral dynamics, complexity theory, appreciative inquiry and action inquiry. The following section will briefly outline key resources identified by the Ginger members in each of these areas.

### **Dialogue + Collective Wisdom**

Clearly, the Gingers have a great interest in finding ways to access collective wisdom. The pinnacle of dialogue is when groups start to think together. Many experts speak about groups spontaneously thinking the same thought: “a mysterious recognition begins to dawn in the group that they are no longer operating as separate individuals but are actually thinking together”(Hamilton, 2004, p. 1). Key resources in this topic area cited by Gingers were Isaac’s *Art of Thinking Together* and Senge et al’s *Presence*.

Fetzer Foundation has been interested in bringing together thought leaders to advance the field of mind/body connections. However, as they were having challenges accessing group

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

wisdom, they started their own research to understand collective thinking. The result was a publication entitled *Centered on the Edge: Mapping a field of Collective Intelligence and Spiritual Wisdom*. The majority of the Gingers cited this publication as the most influential resource for their work.

The resources related to dialogue commonly mentioned by Ginger members included Scott, Shaw and Kegan and Lahey. Scott's *Fierce Conversations* (Scott, 2004) suggests that we need to be fearless and delve into our private thoughts in a public way. While boldness is important, the quiet space in between speaking can be just as important to a conversation. Scott suggests, "let silence do the heavy lifting".

Shaw (Shaw, 2002) examines the current role of facilitators and the common pitfalls that we have developed by seeking structured agendas and systematic approaches: "it is as though our capacity for self-conscious reflection gives us delusions of omniscience and omnipotence. Our sophisticated capacity for observing our own participation tempts us to think we can grasp the whole picture and manage its dynamics to suit our well- or ill-meaning ends" (p. 5).

Kegan and Lahey (2001) present a model of how people use language to shift or transform behaviors and society. They present four internal languages transformations: complaint to commitment; blame to responsibility; resolutions to competing commitments; and big assumptions that hold us to the language. They also suggest there are three social language shifts: prizes/praising to ongoing regard; rules/policies to public agreement; and constructive criticism to deconstructive criticism.

## Spiral Dynamics

Beck and Cowan (Beck & Cowan, 2000) developed a theory of human development called Spiral Dynamics, based on the work of Clare Graves' Emergent Cyclic Double-Helix Model of Adult Biopsychosocial Systems Development. Their model includes various conceptual models called v memos that reflect systems of core values and worldviews. The memos are color coded and split into two tiers. While each level includes and transcends the previous memo, the model is not linear/hierarchical as individuals and cultures do not fall neatly into a single category. Each stage can have healthy or unhealthy states.

Ginger affiliate Marilyn Hamilton is one of the leading Canadian trainers in Spiral Dynamics. Marilyn brings her depth of understanding to Ginger inquiries as she is able to apply the model to specific situations. I have found her pragmatic approach to be very helpful in. For example, at an inquiry on pandemics, Marilyn was able to use the spiral approach to help us make sense of how the different types of people and memos viewed the world. While each memo has a different emphasis about what is important to them, there is not a singular right view. However, if we wanted to create a strategy about increasing awareness about pandemics that would appeal broadly, it would be important to take into consideration several memos' interests.

Several Gingers also mentioned the work of Ken Wilber, particularly his Integral Theory. Recently, Beck has been working with Wilber to apply spiral dynamics. As opposed to reductive approaches, Integral Theory is a systematic way to incorporate and build upon a

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

variety of philosophies. In his more recent book, *A Theory of Everything* (Wilber, 2000), Wilber integrates spiral dynamics and makes linkages between business, politics, science and spirituality.

### **Action Inquiry**

Many Gingers commented on the importance of Torbert's Action Inquiry model in their work. Torbert (2004) uses the term "action inquiry" to describe an approach to incorporating learning and action:

We mean a kind of behavior that is simultaneously productive and self-assessing. Action inquiry is behavior that does several things at once. It listens into the developing situation. It accomplishes whatever tasks appear to have priority. And it invites a revisioning of the task (and of our own action!) if necessary. Action inquiry is always a timely discipline to exercises because its purpose is always in part to discover, whether coldly and precisely or warmly and stumblingly, what action is timely. p. 13

Torbert identifies how people and organizations can analyze situations without reacting.

The ultimate goal is to be in a state of continually action inquiry that leads to transformational learning.

### **Complexity Theory**

Almost all of the Gingers commented on the importance of the Routledge series "Complexity and Emergence in Organizations" and "Complexity as the Experience of Organizing." In these series, the central principles of complexity theory – emergence and self-organization – are explored through practical applications and case studies. In one of the publications most commonly cited by the Gingers, Stacey, Griffin & Shaw (2000) tries to debunk claims about complexity theory made by ill-informed management writers. Many writers are using the concepts superficially and using the topic as a fad rather than understanding the roots. Stacey

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

suggests that we need to shift from a systems perspective to complex responsive processes. Ginger Affiliate Kate McLaren has a great interest in complexity theory and many other members commented on her influence in bringing this thinking to the group.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

Ginger members are also interested in Appreciative Inquiry (AI), an approach based on the principle of doing more of what is working well rather than focusing or getting drawn into problems. Cooperrider and Suresh (1987) developed the concept of appreciative inquiry in response to dominant positivist structures:

Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. (Copperider & Whitney, 2006, p. 3).

Appreciative Inquiry utilizes a four-stage process: discover, dream, design and deliver (Copperider & Whitney). The process starts with the identification of what is working well with organizational processes, before moving to co-creating a vision of the future. Processes are then designed and implemented.

Several Ginger members mentioned one of Canada’s foremost scholar-practitioners in appreciative inquiry, Busche, a professor at Simon Fraser University. Busche (2001), claims that our organizations have sunk into a deep mush and we need to work on skills that build clarity. Clarity comes from clearing out the interpersonal issues and sometimes requires an organizational learning conversation. This is a conversation where people level with each other about their experience so that they can learn about and change the troublesome

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

patterns they find themselves in. Agreement comes from the ability of a group to think together and make decisions.

It is interesting to note the concurrence between the Ginger's mission, objectives and interests. It is a passionate group that is fueled by curiosity and interest in on-going learning. As a community of practice, members continuing identify new resources and theories that helps to keep individuals aware of the larger field of collaborative wisdom.

### **Reflection on Different Ways of Thinking Together**

It has been close to a year that I have been working on this Knowledge Area and giving careful consideration to systems engagement. In this time, I have tried to apply my learning to my on-going facilitation. During this period, I was also invited to become a member of the Ginger Collaborative; an offer I delightfully accepted. During this past year, several points have surfaced that give direction to my research at Fielding.

### **Other Ways of Knowing**

When reading Bohm, Senge and Isaacs, I noticed that my own thinking became stalled. I started to pay attention to the masculine force around their thinking. In many ways, it felt like they were trying to conquer dialogue by controlling the mind and thoughts. Through suspension of thinking, they suggest that you can engage in clearly hearing thoughts of others. However, I find this to be strenuous work in comparison to the collaborative inquiry

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

approaches used by the Ginger Group. The Gingers seem to open up space through creative means and the community naturally co-creates the dialogue.

For me, one of the main differences with the Ginger Group is that they engage in multiple ways of knowing and accessing non-rational wisdom through the arts. Dialogue is a key aspect but there are other ways to engage the body, mind and spirit. In comparison, Bohm dialogue is focused on cognitive aspects with the mind cut off from the body.

I will illustrate this point with an example of how the Gingers use other ways of knowing from the August Collaborative Inquiry. Midway through the session, it became clear that the group needed to think about its organizational structure and future. While the group started as a learning community, new professional opportunities were emerging. We moved to one of the back rooms to hold this session. The “core group” sat in the middle held a dialogue while the rest of the Gingers circled them and intuitively painted what we heard. Several interesting themes surfaced through the use of visuals, including a diagram from the core group. Throughout the session, the room felt electric though we were not necessarily suspending assumptions, as Bohm would advocate. However, through focused togetherness using alternative means of expression, we came to a common vision of where the Gingers were going. There was a sense of holding space for something to be birthed. In my opinion, this session was a critical event in the Ginger’s history as the group identified the new path of creating both the community of practice and the business arm for the organization.

## **Women's Ways of Knowing**

In comparison to the largely male dominated MIT dialogue group, the Gingers are more female oriented. Twelve of the fifteen Ginger affiliates are female and I have wondered how women's ways of knowing influence the work of the collaborative.

Linguist Deborah Tannen (1990) has investigated the difference between how men and women speak. Tannen describes gender patterns in several conversation rituals such as apologizing to restore balance in conversation and taking blame in order to influence people or investigate a situation. Tannen has documented that as individuals, men engage with the world in a hierarchical social order while women engage as a network of connections. For women, conversations are a way to negotiate intimacy and closeness while for men, conversations are more about sorting out dominance and power issues.

In reading the classic text, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997), what impressed me most was the approach that the writers took to developing the material: "we began to refer to our method as 'pajama-party model scholarship' to emphasize the fact that we worked by meeting and working in our homes days at a time, laughing, arguing, and eating together" (Goldberger, 1996, p. xi).

Even when they published the book, they took a non-traditional approach of listing their names in alphabetical order rather than debating who was the most important contributor. The focus was on the collaborative rather than the individual: "we kept in mind the metaphor of a chorus of voices that was to sing the story we wanted to tell; there were to be

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

no solos” (Goldberger et al., 1996, p. xi). Maher and Tetrault also discussed this as an important approach to women’s ways of knowing: there is a “...necessity for a methodological shift away from the individual as the only source and end point of our knowledge” (Maher & Tetrault, 1996, p. 156)

Rather than losing a sense of identity, if there is trust in a group, a deeper level of knowledge can be accessed. As Clinchy encourages, “Both separate and connected knowing achieve their full power when practiced in partnership with other like-minded knowers” (Clinchy, 1996, p. 233)

To mark this point of the collective, the Gingers call themselves a collaborative. Agendas are co-created at the start of each meeting with everyone participating. As a new member to the group, I felt welcome and many members would help fill me in on historical issues as well as make sure there was space for me to speak.

Another interesting perspective on learning in community comes from critical feminist bell hooks. bell hooks’ interest in women’s studies as the only place that she could engage in meaningful dialogue about differences:

During my twenty years of teaching, I have witnessed a grave sense of dis-ease among professors (irrespective of their politics) when students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simple as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge. When I was an undergraduate, Women's Studies was just finding a place in the academy. Those classrooms were the one space where teachers were willing to acknowledge a connection between ideas learned in university settings and those learned in life practices. And, despite those times when students abused that freedom in the classroom by only wanting to dwell on personal experience, feminist classrooms were, on the whole, one location where I witnessed professors striving to create participatory spaces for the sharing of

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

knowledge. Nowadays, most women's studies professors are not as committed to exploring new pedagogical strategies. Despite this shift, many students will still seek to enter feminist classrooms because they continue to believe that there, more than in any other place in the academy, they will have an opportunity to experience education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 15)

In reading bell hooks, I was interested in her approach to teaching groups that was based on freedom. I was interested in approaches that were more liberating and allow diversity of thinking. I suspect many professions, both men and women alike, are looking for a community in which they can practice expression of thought and critical thinking in search of personal freedom.

### **Space for Transformative Development**

Based on the readings for this course, I am interested in the opportunity for my research to explore transformative learning within a group.

Once again, the Ginger's provided me with an example of transformative thinking at the August Collaborative Inquiry. It is very similar to the group learning experience described by Kasl and Elias (2000). At the meeting, the group was trying to make sense of the emerging shape of the Ginger Group organization and there was much discussion about membership: what made someone a Ginger? One of the participants remarked that perhaps we needed to consider that the whole world might be Ginger. This is noted in the following excerpt from the inquiry report:

The artificial boundary between them and us is starting to blur. Especially with David's comment from the afternoon about the possibility that the whole world is Ginger. (p. 14)

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

This remark made the group really think about the artificial boundaries we created between the rest of the world and us. It challenged us to be more open to working with others as partners, rather than as clients. A profound silence filled the room as people viewed the collaborative in a new way. In their example, Kasl and Elias describe this type of experience in relationship to Kegan's (1994) stages of consciousness development:

The realization that our inquiry about transformative learning theory could transcend institutional context changed our relationship with our identities, prodding us away from Order 4 structure, where a group is its identity, toward Order 5 structure, in which a group has identities that can be the object of its own self-reflection. P. 238

In transforming from Order 4 to Order 5, the self is no longer its identity. In the Ginger's case, they could transcend their identity and view their role in the world in a new way.

Transformation is not an easy process as we meet the edges of our own thinking:

“transformative space can feel very dangerous. My experience has shown me that the edge is the most precarious – and important- transformative space. It is in this liminal space that we can come to terms with the limitations of our knowing and thus begin to stretch those limits” (Garvey Berger, 2004, p.338).

Transformation in groups is even more precarious as we come to terms with the blurring of own thinking and the collective wisdom of the group. While Kasl, Marsick and Dechant (1997) suggest that it is possible to balance teamwork and individual expression if they are consensually developed, O'Hara remarks on the magnitude of strength that is needed for an individual to move to the edge of knowing within a group:

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

To surrender to a group of people we barely know and allow our own being to be altered in the meeting is in a psychological sense to die and be reborn, transformed in the meeting. Deep dialogue risks psychological death. This is an immense challenge and not a state to be entered into lightly. Letting go requires a kind of faith. (O'Hara, 2003, p.76)

In my experience, the Gingers exhibit some of the characteristics of O'Hara's (2003) conscious communities or integral groups. There is a higher level of personal consciousness and participants are fully present to themselves and each other. I find the way that the Gingers hold space to be joyful and playful. It feels more nurturing and I am willing to venture forth and take risks, facing making mistakes with a less serious attitude.

## Closing Considerations for An Emergent Opening

*Everything is in everything.*

*The part is a place for the presencing of the whole.*

~ Bortoft (Senge et al., 2004, p. 5)

As an external facilitator, I am constantly bringing together different groups of people to learn and perform together. Pulling from Barrett's reflections on jazz and group learning, one of my challenges is to create spaces that allow people to truly listen to each other and learn the intricacies and meaning of each other's music.

Scharmer (2004b) describes the secret to reaching this place as "let go to let come." In order for groups to let go, they need to feel confident and competent in their knowledge as well as the rest of the team. Csikszentmihalyi describes this place as finding flow: "at some point, the music becomes bigger than oneself and takes on an element of the whole. Often, musicians are able to perform beyond their capacity and may establish peak performance or flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

I have appreciated the opportunity to play and try out new things within the supportive environment of the Ginger Group. One of the characteristics of jazz is that musicians practice taking turns and alternate between solos and supporting: "the role of accompaniment or "comping" is a very active and influential one: it provides a framework which facilitates and constrains the soloist" (Barrett, 1998, p. 616).

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

As Barrett (1998) states, not all organizations are at this place of trust or competence: “no amount of listening, support or “comping” can enhance a performance if the performer is not up to the task” (p. 620). Personally, I need to have confidence in my own ability as a facilitator in order to be fully present to listen for what needs to emerge from the group.

The notion that groups have an emergent nature has been helpful for guiding my facilitation.

Similar to the emergent nature of the groups, joining a community of practice is a process of gradual unfolding: “in order for jazz to work, players must develop a remarkable degree of empathic competence, a mutual orientation to one another’s unfolding” (Barrett, 1998, p. 613).

By joining the Gingers, I have been learning a new language and watching gifted role models practice their skills. Within a community of practices, members learn the common language by hanging to or as Barrett states “learning the code and behaving like one of the members” (p. 613).

### **My future research**

This Knowledge Area identified several areas that I would like to explore in further detail. I am interested in understanding the role of non-rational knowledge in group learning, particularly from Eastern perspectives that place more emphasis on the collective rather than the individual. How can we bring the full body, not just the head into our groups? I hope that my research project with the Shambhala institute will provide an opportunity for contemplative practices to integrate the head, body and spirit and access deeper wisdom.

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

In closing, this essay was an opportunity to explore how to use small groups to investigate the whole. As a metaphor for this emergent nature of collective wisdom, Senge (2004) identified how a seed “is a gateway through which the future possibility of the living tree emerges” (Senge et al., 2004, p. 3). The small group is a doorway to enter the whole system. The whole and the parts are interrelated. Sometimes, it may be best to engage the entire system by bringing it into the room while other times, small group dialogue may be better suited for what needs to emerge.

## REFERENCES

- Argyris, C., & Schon, D. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Barge, J. K., & Little, M. (2002). Dialogical wisdom, communicative practice and organizational life. *Communication Theory*, 12(4), 375-397.
- Barrett, F. J. (1998). Coda: Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations: Implications for organizational learning. *Organization Science*, 9(5), 605-622.
- Beck, D. E., & Cowan, C. (2000). *Spiral dynamics: Mastering values, leadership and change*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1997). *Women's way of knowing: The development of self, voice and mind* (10th anniversary ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Bohm, D. (1996). *On dialogue*. New York: Routledge.
- Bohm, D., Factor, D., & Garrett, P. (1991). Dialogue - a proposal. Retrieved March 1, 2006, from [www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue\\_proposal.html](http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html)
- Busche, G. (2001). *Clear leadership: How outstanding leaders make themselves understood, cut through the mush and help everyone get real at work*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing.
- Clinchy, B. M. (1996). Connected and separate knowing: Towards a marriage of two minds. In N. R. Goldberger, B. M. Clinchy, J. M. Tarule & M. F. Belenky (Eds.), *Knowledge, difference and power: Essays inspired by women's ways of knowing* (pp. 205-247). New York: Basic Books.
- Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 1, 129-169.
- Copperider, D. L., & Whitney, D. (2006). A positive revolution in change: Appreciative inquiry. Retrieved December 23, 2006, from [appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/whatisai.pdf](http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/whatisai.pdf)
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). *Flow*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Ellinor, L., & Gerard, G. (1998). *Dialogue: Rediscover the transforming power of conversation*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. Bergman Ramos, Trans.). New York: Herder and Herder.
- Garvey Berger, J. (2004). Dancing on the threshold of meaning: Recognizing and understanding the growing edge. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 2(4), 336-351.

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

- Ginger Group Collaborative. (2006). Ginger group introduction. Retrieved August 31, 2006, from [www.gingergroup.net](http://www.gingergroup.net)
- Goldberger, N. R. (1996). *Knowledge, difference and power: Essays inspired by women's ways of knowing*. New York: Basic.
- Gunnlaugson, O. (2006). Generative dialogue as a transformative learning practice in adult and higher education settings. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education, 12*(1), 2-19.
- Hamilton, C. (2004). Come together: Can we discover a depth of wisdom far beyond what is available to individuals alone? *What is Enlightenment*.
- Hart, T. (2004). Opening the contemplative mind in the classroom. *Journal of Transformative Education, 2*(1), 28-46.
- Hassan, Z., & Kahane, A. (2005). The u-process: A social technology for addressing highly complex challenges. Retrieved December 14, 2006, from [www.generationconsulting.com/publications/papers/index.html](http://www.generationconsulting.com/publications/papers/index.html)
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Isaacs, W. (1996). Taking flight: Dialogue, collective thinking and organizational learning. *Organizational Dynamics, 22*(2), 24-39.
- Isaacs, W. (1999a). Dialogic leadership. *The Systems Thinker, 10*(1), 1-5.
- Isaacs, W. (1999b). *Dialogue and the art of thinking together: A pioneering approach to communicating in business and in life*. New York: Currency.
- Isaacs, W. (2001). Toward an action theory of dialogue. *International Journal of Public Administration, 24*(7), 709.
- Kahane, A. (2004). *Solving tough problems: An open way of talking, listening and creating new realities*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Kasl, E., & Elias, D. (2000). Creating new habits of mind in small groups. In J. Mezirow (Ed.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 229-252). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kasl, E., Marsick, V. J., & Dechant, K. (1997). Team as learners. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 33*(2), 227-246.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

- Kofman, F., & Senge, P. (1993). Communities of commitment: The heart of learning organizations. *Organizational Dynamics*, 22(2), 5-23.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Maher, F. A., & Tetrault, M. (1996). Women's ways of knowing in women's studies, feminist pedagogies, and feminist theory. In N. R. Goldberger, B. M. Clinchy, J. M. Tarule & M. F. Belenky (Eds.), *Knowledge, difference and power: Essays inspired by women's ways of knowing*. New York: Basic Books.
- McWhinney, W., & Markos, L. (2003). Transformative education: Across the threshold. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 16-36.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1, 58-63.
- National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. (2002). Categorizing the dialogue and deliberation community. Retrieved August 1, 2006, from [www.thataway.org/resources/understand/categorize.html](http://www.thataway.org/resources/understand/categorize.html)
- O'Hara, M. (2003). Cultivating consciousness: Carl R. Rogers's person-centered group process as transformative andragogy. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 64-79.
- Pearce, B. W. (2004a). The coordinated management of meaning. In W. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing communication and culture* (pp. 35-54). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pearce, B. W. (2004b). Mini-lecture on three approaches to dialogue (pp. 1-3): Fielding Graduate Institute.
- Por, G. (2006). Blog of collective intelligence. Retrieved December 11, 2006, from [www.community-intelligence.com/blogs/public/](http://www.community-intelligence.com/blogs/public/)
- Scharmer, C. O. (1999). The heart is the key to all of this: Conversation with Joseph Jaworski. Retrieved December 19, 2006, from [www.dialogonleadership.org](http://www.dialogonleadership.org).
- Scharmer, C. O. (2000). Presencing: Learning from the future as it emerges, *Conference on Knowledge and Innovation*. Helsinki School of Economics Finland.
- Scharmer, C. O. (2004a). Illuminating the blind spot of leadership. *Fieldnotes*, 6.
- Scharmer, C. O. (2004b). *Theory U: Leading profound innovation and change by presencing emerging futures*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Scharmer, C. O. (2006). Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges. *Fieldnotes*, 11.

## Collective Wisdom through Small Group Engagement

- Schein, E. H. (1993). On dialogue, culture, and organizational learning. *Organizational Dynamics*, 22(2), 40-51.
- Scott, S. (2004). *Fierce conversations: Achieving success at work and in life, one conversation at a time*. New York: Viking.
- Seely Brown, J., & Duguid, P. (1991). Organizational learning and communities-of-practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning and innovation. *Organization Science*, 2(1), 40-57.
- Senge, P. (1994). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of learning organizations*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
- Senge, P., Scharmer, O., Jaworski, J., & Flowers, B. S. (2004). *Presence: Human purpose and the field of the future*. Cambridge, MA: Society for Organizational Learning, Inc.
- Shaw, P. (2002). *Changing conversations in organizations: A complexity approach to change*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, M., K. (2005, January 30). Plato. Retrieved July 11, 2006, 2006, from [www.infed.org/thinkers/et-plato.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-plato.htm)
- Stacey, R. D., Griffin, D., & Shaw, P. (2000). *Complexity and management: Fad or radical challenge to systems thinking*. New York: Routledge.
- Torbert. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership* (first ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Vella, J. K. (2002). *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The power of dialogue in educating adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Weisbord, M. R., & Janoff, S. (1995). *Future search: An action guide to finding common ground in organizations and communities*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Wilber, K. (2000). *A theory of everything: An integral for business, politics, science and spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Wilhelmson, L. (2006). Dialogue meetings as non-formal adult education in a municipal context. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 4(3), 243-256.