TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY:
A MORE PERFECT UNION FOR DEEP ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

At the organizational level, attempts at altering strategy, operations and culture imply that shifts in performance will occur due to changed or enlightened perspectives (Davis & Ziegler, 2000; Kasl & Elias, 2000; Shaw & Taylor, 2000; Yorks & Marsick, 2000). The literature of change, while addressing the needs of individuals and groups for information and social engagement, gives scant attention to the derivation of those enlightened perspectives that enable stakeholders to fully and purposefully engage in organizational transformation. We argue that deep and long-lasting perspective transformation can occur within times of significant change as the result of the specific combination of individual and collective processes described herein.

Perspective transformation is defined as ". . . the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world" (Mezirow, 1999: 167). A shift in perspective is the outcome of learning. Therefore, theory related to individual learning in the midst of change can provide a conceptual platform to propose a similar group level process. To make the leap from insights and behavior change at individual level to comparable results at the group level calls for incorporation of theories that uphold similar principles of the nature of the person, of learning, of the organization, and of change. The convergence of Transformative Learning (TL) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provides such a foundation. Possibilities for joining these theoretical perspectives and practices, and the potential impact of their synergy, will be illustrated through discussion of a new bridging construct, Appreciative Transformative Learning (ATL), which builds strength from the union of TL and AI in fostering deep and lasting organizational change.

From our point of view, change of this nature begins at the individual level and then expands to the group as a direct outcome of individual and collective transformative learning. To result in new behaviors at the organizational level, this change must be embedded in the cognition, memory, and perspective of individuals and the whole. Others have identified this process as collective or organizational learning (e.g., Akgün, Lynn & Byrne, 2003).

As it is addressed in this paper, transformation includes cognitive, emotional and social components of knowledge and behavioral change. At the cognitive level, learning needs to be integral to change, an effect confirmed by establishing or reestablishing understanding, belief and behavior. At an emotional level, transformation may elicit a range of reactions. Affirming and elevating reactions to individual and organizational effectiveness, such as empathy, encouragement, confirmation, self-efficacy, happiness, peace or euphoria, can result from

discovering new or deeper meaning within experiences or beliefs. Disorienting dilemmas, which occur as individuals are made uncomfortable by experiences or assumptions incongruent with their worldview, may lead to negative emotions including fear, loss of faith, hopelessness, or disenchantment. At social levels, transformation may be instrumental in fostering stronger relationship, inspiring loyalty or nurturing community development; conversely, it may bring about misunderstanding, conflict or polarity. In other words, transformation may be construed as value- and valence-neutral, though it is commonly assumed to be an unquestioned good. Marsick (in Mezirow & Associates, 1990: 23) points out that:

> . . . (t)oday, workers at all levels are called upon to think differently and more deeply about themselves, their work, and their relationship to the organization. This is nowhere more evident than in the ranks of managers, whose very survival is threatened by mergers and acquisitions, downsizing, and flattening of the organizational pyramid.

For example, this capacity depends on learning to reflect on and in action (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Daudelin (1996, as cited in Rigano & Edwards, 1999) found that:

> Efforts by some major companies such as PepsiCo, Motorola and General Motors to harness reflection as a deliberate tool of learning is a significant trend towards addressing the need for formal reflective practices in the workplace.

Examining TL provides insight into how AI can foster deep change in organizations. Beginning with an overview of the theories behind TL and AI, this paper explores the intersections of these frameworks, and makes a case for a spiral structure supported by constructionist ideas of organizational learning.

Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow, TL produces substantive change in an individual's thinking and behavior. It ". . . results in new or transformed meaning schemes, or when reflection focuses on premises, transformed meaning perspectives" (Mezirow, 1991: 6). Among its action steps are: 1) experiencing a disorienting dilemma; 2) undergoing self-examination; 3) conducting a critical assessment of role assumptions; 4) recognizing that one's problem is shared; 5) exploring options for new ways of acting; and 6) building competence and self-confidence in new roles (Mezirow: 168). For transformative learning to occur, new concepts and behaviors need to be in relation to the old. This requires a learning laboratory (Schön, 1987) – a safe environment to experiment with new ideas and behaviors. It "involves helping people surface, question and reframe their stories when their current stories are disconfirmed or break down" (Hargrove, 1995: 62). Hargrove drew heavily on Argyris and Schön in the development of his perspective, using questions as a model for clarifying stories from clients. He emphasizes not accepting the client's interpretation at face value – or as the only interpretation – of the situation. This can foster triple loop learning – "transforming who people are by creating a shift in people's context or point of view about themselves" (Hargrove, 1995: 27).

Boyd and Fales (1998) stressed that sharing one's reflections with others, having a sense of openness and receptivity to information within and outside the self, and setting aside previously held positions are integral and essential to the reflective process. Similarly, Dilworth (2004) strengthens the link between reflection and action as he reminds us that, Reg Revans saw the reflective component as "an essential complement to action. …In fact, the learning flows from the reflective part of action learning more than the action component. The action component gives us the ammunition for reflective examination, learning and change" (Dilworth,

in ICSAI Books). Hence, dialogue and reflection must include action in order to create and support transformational change. This suggests a natural pairing with the Action Technologies and a strong affinity with AI, as described in the next section.

Appreciative Inquiry

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) devised a pathway that encouraged transformation based on unique experiences of the exceptional already lived by individual stakeholders in the organization's present and future. Two distinct standpoints significantly differentiate the change process that has come to be known as Appreciative Inquiry. First, Cooperrider's work is within the framework of constructionist theory. This foundation is explained by Gergen (1985) as:

> . . . principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live. It attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they now exist, as they have existed in prior historical periods, and as they might exist should creative attention be so directed.

van der Haar and Hosking (2004) make an important distinction between constructivism and constructionism. The former is primarily an intra-cognitive activity of an individual inquirer who separates him/herself from his/her own discourse. In contrast, constructionism is socio-relational and focuses attention on processes of relating, with the inquirer seen as a participant in the discourse that s/he is co-constructing. Constructionism is germane to the foundations of AI, although constructivism also plays an important role.

Second, Cooperrider departed from prevailing approaches to managing change that operated from mechanistic, problem solving modes. In seeking the best of what existed as the building blocks of the future, his theory evolved from generative assumptions regarding the capacity of people and organizations to adapt. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) explain:

> Appreciative Inquiry is about the coevolutionary 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.

AI first integrated four principles that derived from Cooperrider and Srivastva's (1987) initial appreciative model for action research: research into the social (innovation) potential of organizational life should begin with appreciation and be applicable, provocative, and collaborative. These original tenets evolved as scholars and practitioners examined and applied AI. In 1999 Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) named five principles that underlie the worldview and practice of AI, the constructionist, poetic, anticipatory, positive, and simultaneity principles.

Cooperrider spanned the distance between incipient, incidental occurrences of achievement and purposeful, consistent excellence. This was accomplished through dialogue that made tacit knowledge explicit, unrecognized values identifiable, and brought social systems as well as technical ones into play. At this juncture organizational change and organizational learning intersect.

Relationship of Transformative Learning to Appreciative Inquiry

TL, a descriptive theory, clarifies how an individual moves into enlightened change, and AI, an applied construct and generative worldview, provides the model for engaging the system

in pursuit of transformation informed by grounded experience and values. In both TL and AI, meaning making is enhanced by anecdotes of lived experience. Stories and clarification are central to both TL and AI – stories of the past and of the real and imagined future. Stories of the past are examined as sources of strength (AI) or as barriers (TL) in relation to development of the organization or the person. These very narratives help to uncover the values and beliefs that lead to habits of the mind which an organization must be cognizant of before they can be replicated or replaced.

AI theorists increasingly call for the incorporation of reflection and reflexive practices within AI processes (Fineman, 2006; Fitzgerald & Oliver, 2006; Fitzgerald, Oliver, & Hoxsey, 2007; Grant & Humphries, 2006). van der Haar & Hosking (2004: 1027) suggest that, "reflexivity now becomes a quality of the appreciative process - rather than an act of the inquirer in relation to his or her reality construction and 'after' the intervention has 'finished'". Thus, this valuing of reflection, integral to TL, is increasingly advocated for AI as well.

The process of self-reflection has been thoroughly documented on the individual level. Bandura (1986, cited in Pajares, 1996) saw beliefs that people hold about themselves as key elements in determining how they will act. This is consistent with the views of other theorists who describe the influence of beliefs as a filter supporting or constraining behavior (Pajares, 1996, citing Abelson, 1979; Dewey, 1933; James, 1885, 1975; Mead, 1982). In addition, Kelly (1963) and Ellis and Harper (1975) perceive working with the constructs or beliefs that individuals hold as crucial to effecting change. Further, Bandura (1986) recognizes the reciprocal relationship between individual and environment, with the individual as both producer and product of life events and their own social system.

On the organizational level, Bushe (1999) explicates these connections. First, organizations have an inner dialogue made up of the things people say to each other in small confidential groups that are undiscussible in official forums of organizational business. Second, this inner dialogue is a powerful stabilizing force in social systems that accounts for the failure to follow through on rationally arrived at decisions. In it people's real thoughts and feelings about what is discussed in official forums are revealed and communicated. Third, this inner dialogue is mainly carried through the stories people tell themselves and each other to justify their interpretation of events and decisions.

In some ways, Bushe's (1999) observations reflect what Fitzgerald and Oliver (2006) refer to as the individual and collective shadow, which they define as censored emotion and cognition, where the term "censored" refers to any conscious or unconscious regulation of cognition and/or emotion by self or others where their expression is considered to not fit with "accepted" cultural or group norms (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Ironically, when reflexive practices are absent from AI processes, interpretations of AI as being exclusively focused on the "positive" may unwittingly strengthen the shadow and increase, rather than decrease, negative behavioral manifestations associated with the repressed material (Fitzgerald & Oliver, 2006). However, reflection to recognize, include, value, express, and understand the shadow can promote transformative learning and change, both individually and collectively (Fitzgerald & Oliver, 2006).

Dialogue coupled with reflection and moved to action creates the conditions for transformative learning. This assertion appears throughout the literature on Action Technologies (Davis & Zeigler, 2000; Kasl & Elias, 2000; Shaw & Taylor, 2000; Yorks & Marsick, 2000). For example:

Reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983, 1987) involves looking back on personal experiences to evaluate practical reasoning and build personal theories of action. Schön's (1983) discussion of reflection-in-action adds to the picture of learning from experience. He sees learning as occurring when a reflective conversation occurs, drawing on experience to understand a situation, framing and reframing, suggesting action, then re-interpreting the situation in light of possible outcomes.

When AI is informed by TL theory, the conditions of a Reflective Practicum (Schön, 1983) are created. As the AI practitioner provides for dialogue and reflection-in- and on-action, participants are able to deepen the shift in thinking created by taking an appreciative stance. This critical self-reflection was previously observed in action learning (Revans, 1978, 1982), and intended to generate solutions exploiting concrete experiences of the group. Boyle and Fales (1998) cite Butler (1996), who added reflection-to-action in his description of a model for human action and change, as he offered "the means for individuals to achieve learning through action and to improve performance" as "reflection-to-, -on and -in-action."

Mezirow (1991: 209) says that "(a)ction is an integral and indispensable component of transformative learning". He further discusses the interplay between the personal (individual) and public (societal or organizational) spheres in the transformative process, reminding us that:

Personal transformation involving sociolinguistic distortions can only happen when a perspective of social change is involved, and, social change, in turn, depends upon personal transformation.

Mezirow links the TL process to a need for strategy to create change. AI offers that called-for strategic component with a framework within which the theoretical internal process is made an external, social reality. It is our contention that the opportunity for deep change at the organizational level is intertwined with transformation at the individual level because of the prospect for a shift of both thought and action.

Bushe and Kassam (2005) performed a meta-analysis of twenty AI cases published prior to 2003 to determine the extent to which transformational change occurred. In discussing their findings, they observe that:

The idea of changing how people think lurks implicitly in the normative re-educative change model (Chin & Benne, 1976: 176), which is a foundation of the OD field, but usually the focus in application of that theory is on changing group norms and accepted behaviors.… The forms of engagement that have evolved in AI practice may not, in the end, turn out to be the best way to engage collective ideation, but these research cases demonstrate that doing so appears to be central to transformational change.

This collective ideation appeared to be critical to the transformational outcomes across the 20 AI cases they studied and the result of new knowledge creation, a generative metaphor, and penetration that shifted the 'ground' of the organization (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Given that Mezirow (2000) calls for a strategy to actualize transformative learning, and Bushe and Kassam (2005) suggest that learning is related to the degree to which organizational change is transformational, we recommend that in practice AI and TL can inform and support one another. Further, we argue that AI may generate transformative change more consistently by ensuring opportunities for reflection in action.

The union of these constructs and the opportunity for reflection to be amalgamated with AI are outlined by Donovan and Meyer (2006). It is a practicum aligned with the AI process (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). In their view the Discover phase provides the context for individuals and groups to inquire together about successful experiences. At the same time

previously hidden individual and collective strengths and capacities are uncovered. Within its Dream phase, previous role assumptions are challenged, expectations begin to be reframed and positive images of an exceptional future are co-created. Concurrently, participants recognize their shared strengths and capacities. The Design phase fosters the adoption of a new mindset that emerges in provocative propositions. It also encourages individuals and groups to explore options and to embed their new mindset in socio-technical systems. Finally, within the Destiny phase, there are occasions for continuous investment in competence and confidence as new roles and relationships are lived. Opportunities for inquiry also emerge as the individuals and groups reinforce the system.

Individually and collectively, meaning is constructed within and from encounters with life within context. As Cranton (1994: 26) explains, "We interpret our experiences and the things we encounter in our own way; what we make of the world is a result of our perceptions of our experiences". Reflection in action allows for inspection and interpretation of the history of the personal and group. The output of that process is an identity grounded in past experience.

As a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising these perceptions, TL calls for an examination of prior experiences, values, and frames of reference. Old meaning perspectives are used to interpret new experiences. AI creates opportunities to operate without old meaning perspectives, in an open field of inquiry, as participants engage in Discovery, Dream and Design in the co-creation of new reality. Content and process reflection (Mezirow, 1991: 117) can be incorporated into these phases as a means to delving deeper into the complexity of organizational challenges and the strategic courses of action which are being improvised. Similarly, premise reflection (Cranton, 2006: 34) is a natural component of the AI Dream and Design phases.

If, as Bushe and Kassam (2005: 170) contend, transformation is ". . . a qualitative shift in the state of being or identity of the system, usually reflected in patterns or organization emerging after the appreciative inquiry that were clearly different from previous patterns", AI has occasionally embedded a new level of thinking and behavior. Purposeful incorporation of reflection in action, as understood from TL, into the AI process appears to provide the potential for more consistent transformational change across the entire organization or community.

Conclusion

This discussion illustrates the need to create opportunities for reflection, change, and action within an appreciative framework in order to embed change within an organization, rather than merely espousing positivity. Transformative learning theory, with its emphasis on personal reflection as an integral part of a process of developing and testing meaning schemes with and through others, complements the constructivist aspects of Appreciative Inquiry, adds depth, and creates intriguing possibilities for increasing both the speed and depth of change. It also creates possibilities for change to begin at multiple points within the organization, rather than being limited to top-down efforts.

There is a need for further research that applies Bushe and Kassam's (2005) criteria for organizational transformation to verify the meaning making that underlies the transformative nature of AI. Additionally, the development and integration of reflection in action practices within AI, as well as investigation as to their impact on organizational change, will provide understanding of the nature of systemic meaning making and learning within a generative framework.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS