

Chapter 6

A Collaborative Inquiry: Raising Cross-Cultural Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a Collaborative Inquiry (CI) process as experienced by six diverse female participants in a doctoral program. The focus of the inquiry was to deepen individual and group cross-cultural understanding, and to show how holistic learning can be promoted through integrating multiple ways of knowing and spirituality within a multicultural context. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the readers with sufficient information to apply CI in their practice and build on the research presented here. To meet this goal, the authors describe how CI has the potential to foster transformational learning and discuss the relationship between transformational learning, informational learning, global competencies, developmental capacity, and the paradoxical nature of diversity work. Lastly, the chapter ends with recommendations for creating a CI process that supports deep learning and change, and potential topics for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid changes in the global labor force call for the need to leverage workplace diversity (Ernst & Yip, 2008; Maltbia, 2001; McCuiston, Wooldridge, & Pierce, 2004). Organizations today have started to acknowledge the importance of increasing diversity within their structures, and recognize that cultural diversity can enhance their competitive advantage (Cox & Blake, 1991; Herriot

& Pemberton, 1995). For instance, key research that emerged out of the University of Michigan during the 1960's examined the quality of solutions to assigned problems (Cox & Blake, 1991). In this study, when the production of high quality solutions was compared between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, researchers found that only twenty-one percent of the former produced high quality solutions, as compared to sixty-five percent of the latter (1991). Later findings also confirm the benefits of prioritizing diversity in the workplace (Amla, 2008).

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As the workplace becomes more diversified, however, the construct of “diversity” has become even more challenging to define (Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1998). While early attempts to create a succinct definition often resulted in only race and gender being identified, it was soon recognized that a more inclusive definition was needed (Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Daus, 2002; Oyler & Pryor, 2009). Maltbia and Power (2009) acknowledge the multiple layers and interpretations that exist when examining diversity, and identified some key components of diversity found in the literature. They include inborn human characteristics, personal experiences, organizational dimensions, personal style or tendencies, and external factors (2009).

R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr. (1991) provides a comprehensive definition: “Diversity includes everyone. It is not something that is defined by race or gender. It extends to age, personal and corporate background, education, function, and personality. It includes lifestyle, sexual preference, geographic origin, and management or non-management” (p. 10). Scott (2010) concurs that organizations are now “more diverse culturally, ethnically, linguistically, intellectually, creatively, physically, and spiritually than ever before” (p. x). These views are all encompassing and take into account a more inclusive definition of “diversity” that allows for the support of all employees. Likewise, this handbook calls for an expanded view of “diversity” as well as “transformational strategies” that can be utilized to enhance the workplace. We define “transformational strategies” as those that support transformational learning that “...relates to the development of the cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities that enable a person to manage the complexities of work (e.g., leadership, teaching, learning, adaptive challenges) and life” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 11).

The current expanded view of “diversity” necessitates a theoretical framework as well as an adult learning structure that is more holistic in nature. We suggest that Collaborative Inquiry (CI),

a form of action research, integrated with Heron’s (1992) holistic learning framework can serve as a “strategy for learning from experience” and leveraging workplace diversity (Alcantara, Hayes & Yorks, 2009, p. 251). CI is a “systematic process of action and reflection among co-inquirers who are tackling a common question of burning interest” (Ospina, El Hadidy, & Hofmann-Pinilla, 2008, p. 131). The main purpose is for “members of the inquiry group to change themselves. In response to a sense of personal disquiet or disorienting dilemma, an individual invites others with similar interests to join an inquiry. Together, inquirers formulate a compelling question that they can answer by examining “data” from their personal experience. Their goal is to develop their own capacities, either personal or professional” (Yorks & Kasl, 2002a, p. 5). We refer to “capacity” here as developmental in nature. “Developmental capacity concerns the cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities that enable us to manage better the demands of leadership, teaching, learning, and life” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 8). Furthermore, for developmental capacity to increase, or become more complex, adaptive, and creative, individuals and groups need the right mix of supports and challenges, which has been referred to as a holding environment (Drago-Severson, 2009; Kegan, 1982).

CI thus involves creating a holding environment for a process of reflection and dialogue, and other Ways of Knowing, to occur. This can generate new knowledge for learning and working together. While learning that takes place during CI may take many forms, there is a potential for transformational learning and change (Alcantara, et al., 2009). Our research suggests that CI can serve as a tool to help individuals and groups engage with diversity issues. We found that to fully interact on cognitive, affective, and relational levels, it was necessary to utilize holistic and spiritual learning activities within the CI process. While cross-cultural relationships encourage exposure to varied ways of thinking and being in the world,

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