

**Synergic inquiry (SI):  
an alternative framework for transformative learning.**

Yongming Tang, Ph.D.

**Abstract:** This paper discusses SI which intends to help address a number of challenges facing transformative learning teachers and researchers. The SI framework is briefly introduced with the focus on how it creates contexts, processes and catalysts for transformative learning as well as its relationships with some existing learning theories.

In the context of transformative learning, several challenges remain and deserve our attention. First, we need to clarify what transformation is and how it differs from change. Second, transformative learning teachers and researchers need to understand how to create appropriate contexts, processes, and catalysts for transformation to occur. The next challenge has to do with that transformative learning, currently defined and understood, is in nature Eurocentric and thus mostly limited to the logical/cognitive realm. This then begs the question that (1) whether transformative learning applies to cultures which are less logic-cognition based and (2) if so, whether we as teachers and researchers perpetuate Western intellectual imperialism. The challenge then is to create a new framework of different type, one that has the potential to engage with different cultures and peoples in a richer and more meaningful way. Finally, we face the challenge of fostering capacities within ourselves as well as adult students and larger populations.

In this short paper, I will present an alternative framework for transformative learning, one that intends to address those challenges. Given the limit of space, I will only outline SI in terms of purposes, steps, outcomes, as well as how it relates to other major transformative learning theories. The purpose of the paper is best treated to provoke ideas and conversations. For those who are interested in understanding some of its applications and outcomes please read Masaji Takano's paper and Carole Barlas' paper in the same volume. For those who are interested in having a broader understanding of the framework and its methodological processes please consult other writings (Tang, 1995, 1996; Tang & Joiner, 1997).

**The SI framework**

SI was developed out of both the author's personal experiences with cross-cultural differences and our domestic and international experimentations in various contexts. Over recent years, SI has been applied to settings as varied as individual development, synergic relationships, conflict resolution, team development, organizational development and transformation, community

development, differences between races, ethnic groups, and genders. There have been cross-cultural applications of SI in China, Mexico, India, and the USA.

In a nutshell, SI is a transformative framework that provides conditions, contexts, and catalysts for problem-solving, learning, and growth by expanding human consciousness and capacities. SI is based on a grand pattern -- the Synergy Principle -- which Gregory Bateson (1979) called "the pattern that connects." This pattern is found in many natural sciences, social sciences, theories of evolution of the universe (of matter, life, and mind), Eastern wisdoms such as Taoism, the I-Ching philosophy, and integral philosophy, and in Western Hegelian dialectics (Tang, 1996; Tang & Joiner, 1997). The Synergy Principle is defined as the rhythmic dance of differentiating and integrating which facilitates the evolution of consciousness in matter, life, and mind. SI is then a framework that manifests the Synergy Principle to expand human consciousness and capacities.

In the SI framework, consciousness can simply be understood as the essential structure of human being that defines who we are and how we behave. Three dimensions of consciousness -- the visible, the logical, and the mythical -- can be conveniently used to reflect the essential structure of consciousness. The visible refers to behavioral/physical dimension of consciousness; these include metaphors, gestures, ways of expressions, customs, languages, technology, organization and so forth. This is usually what we can see and feel. The logical dimension refers to the epistemologies, ontologies, or rationalities through which we logically interpret the world. It is manifested in terms of theory, concept, law, or principle, which are primarily mechanisms for explaining how things work. The mythical refers to the mythical-symbolic dimension which goes beyond the logical. Encompassing our deepest beliefs, myth, faith, spirituality, the unsaid, the unthought and so forth, this is the deepest dimension of our human consciousnesses. It informs us about why the world is the way it is.

Expansion of consciousness is defined as those shifts in awareness, new learnings, and additions to awareness, skills, and capacities that occur in all of our lives. The SI framework creates an upward spiral of expanding awareness and improved capacities (see Figure 1). At the core of SI is an action-reflection cycle. After each phase of action work, a reflection process integrates the learning to oneself. To continually expand consciousness and capacities, SI has been conceived as synergy cycles. Within each synergy cycle there are two major processes, one for differentiating and one for integrating.

## **Differentiating**

Differentiating is a critical process designed to identify, reflect upon, and differentiate participants' consciousnesses from each other. Two complementary phases are Self-Knowing and Other-Knowing, each of which has both action and reflection components.

Phase 1. Self-Knowing. The purpose of *Self-Knowing Action* is to deepen awareness about one's own consciousness -- particularly the logical and mythical dimensions-which drives behavior. Normally, we are blind to our consciousnesses, and our interpretations of any phenomenon in the reality are inevitably projections of our own consciousnesses. Thus, without understanding one's own consciousness, one cannot truly expand and grow. *Self-Knowing Reflection* then helps

participants to use what is learnt to re-interpret past and present experiences. Its intention is to integrate new learnings and discoveries about oneself and create opportunity to reinforce new learnings.

Phase II. Other-Knowing. *Other-Knowing Action* is about learning, to cultivate consciousness(es) different from one's own. A major strategy that SI deploys to achieve this purpose is through embodying different consciousnesses. This has to do with putting oneself into another being, i.e., "living," the reality of others. *Other-Knowing Reflection* intends to use what is learnt about others to take another look at oneself, i.e., Self-Knowing. Being in the "shoes" of others creates a possibility for oneself to stand on another mental plane to take a new look at oneself, deriving new learnings and discoveries about oneself.

### **Integrating**

In the integrating process, different consciousnesses within or without oneself dance with each other to create new outcomes. The differences between or among consciousnesses are used as resources to expand individual consciousnesses and capacities. This process also consists of two phases - Differences-Holding and Differences-Transcending -- each of which also has both action and reflection components.

Phase III. Differences-Holding. *Differences-Holding Action* is to cultivate the capacity to hold different consciousnesses as equals. This is about creating a *both-and* mentality within oneself, transforming the usual *either-or* mentality in the Western cultural psyche. *Differences-Holding Reflection* is about integrating the new mentality and new learnings associated into oneself.

Phase IV. Differences-Transcending. *Differences-Transcending Action* is about creating a new consciousness -- *Synergic Consciousness* -- that goes beyond the limitation of the old. In other words, it is consciousness-transcending in that it breaks open old consciousness with new possibilities. As Albert Einstein is often quoted that "No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it," this new consciousness is categorically different (see the expanded figure with two stick-figures inside the brain) and is characterized by its ability to be process-oriented and dance with differences with the purpose of expanding consciousness. In other words, ideally this new consciousness embodies the Synergy Principle. Within individuals this new consciousness is creative and able to use differences as resources; In a collective context, it enables different consciousnesses to create something new and novel that goes beyond that which individual participants could do alone. This is about creating new knowledge or strategies to problem-solve or improve situations). *Differences-Transcending Reflection* is about helping integrate this new consciousness into oneself and reinforce new consciousness and behavior.

Figure 1. The Synergic Inquiry Framework

## **Additional Synergy Cycles**

Expanding consciousness is an on-going process, and what is described above is only intentions and purposes. It does not guarantee that one will be able to achieve them within one synergy cycle at all. That is why synergy cycles are used to enhance learning and growth. The major purpose is to help participants to embody the Synergy Principle -- the universal process for evolving consciousness -- in their behaviors and beings. It is assumed that most problems and crises that face us are created by the limitation of consciousness and the challenging task for us is to accelerate expansion of consciousness and capacities.

## **Discussions**

Now, I turn to addressing those challenges mentioned in the opening of the paper. In addition, I will also attempt to briefly touch upon how SI relates to some other learning theories in the literature. First, we need to clarify what transformation is and how it differs from change. Within the SI framework, transformation refers to expanding consciousness to such an extent that one engages with the world in a qualitatively different way. Change, in contrast, is incremental and quantitative. Such an expansion of consciousness may occur at two levels: logical and mythical. When it happens at the logical level, a set of rationalistic/logical values, assumptions, and beliefs that constitutes Jack Mezirow's (1990, 1991) meaning perspective takes place. This leads to a new logical reinterpretation of experiences and even a new or more complex paradigm, worldview, or meaning perspective.

When a transformative change occurs at the mythical level, however, a deeper transformation that goes beyond the logical dimension of transformation is resulted. When this happens, a new myth, spirituality, or faith is cultivated, that is, one's presuppositions about oneself and the nature of reality is shifted. Reflexively SI brings a new myth which is evolutionary and synergic in nature, described logically as the Synergy Principle, and creates various contexts and forms for participants to embody it so as to continually evolve and expand. This seems beyond the current transformative learning literature which is largely logic-cognition based.

This should not be a surprise, since Western theorists excel, in the meantime, are limited by the logical consciousness. Specifically, transformative learning, currently defined and understood, is in nature Eurocentric and is limited to the logical/cognitive realm. For example, some of the major learning theories such as transformative learning of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1990, 1991), Argyris and Schon's (1979, 1995) single-loop and double-loop learning and Bateson's (1972) Learning levels (I, II, III) have one thing in common: that is, they all deal with learning within logical contexts and they seem to fail to see the mythical dimension of consciousness. Although these theories have made significant impacts on education and human development, it seems they have reached limitations of logic. Although Bateson (1972) actually acknowledged that Learning III might go beyond the reach of language as argued by Zen Buddhists, occidental mystics, and some psychiatrists, he still went ahead to discuss "what must (logically) be the case (p. 302)."

Western scientists and theorists tend to logicalize all phenomena in the reality and deny anything mythical or spiritual, an approach which constitutes one of the most significant obstacles for

achieving world peace and harmony (Vachon, 1995). This should alarm and awaken us as transformative teachers and researchers. As Robert Vachon (1995) forcefully argues, the underlying causes for all of the problems and crises facing us cannot be cured, unless we transform at the mythical level of our consciousness. Intrinsic to the Western logical approach is its *either-or* dualist mentality which perpetuates Western imperialism over other cultures and peoples.

Therefore, let me pronounce that there is a myth underneath the SI framework and it should not be logicalized nor logically questioned. The aim of SI is to create an intelligent and effective form through which all can learn to embody the Synergy Principle for our own evolutionary journey. It is a process framework that enables individuals as well as cultures to engage with each other at an "equal-level playing field." This has made it possible for participants of different cultures and traditions to engage with each other in rich and meaningful ways. The multiple dimensions of consciousness within SI provides room and possibilities for multiple way of knowing and inclusivity.

Transformative learning teachers and researchers also need to know how to create appropriate contexts, processes, or catalysts for transformation to occur. Although transformation cannot be legislated, enabling contexts and conditions can be created. Each phase of SI intends to be transformative, and the intended transformations vary in type. One of the outcomes of Self-Knowing is the learning about the essential structure of one's own lenses through which s/he views the external world. An important transformative outcome for many is that reality is no longer objective and external to us; it is rather constructed through our own lenses, i.e., our consciousnesses project onto the external world. Such a realization enables one to detach and examine one's own consciousness, resulting in new behaviors. In Other-Knowing, when a participant attempts to embody another consciousness in its entirety, something significant emerges. As some participants commented, it is as if one is reincarnated into another being, thus engaging in the world in ways different from one's own.

In Differences-Holding, a major outcome is the capacity to equally hold different consciousnesses within oneself, rather than having one's own singular consciousness to understand (thus misinterpret), subjugate, or even dominate other consciousnesses. This is by far most significant and challenging to achieve. However, after one is able to do so, significant changes do occur (see Takano and Barlas papers in the same volume.). In Differences-Transcending, the transformative journey is enhanced by developing a new qualitatively different consciousness. In doing so, one has transformed into a process-oriented consciousness which is likely to embody the Synergy Principle to accelerate one's own consciousness expansion journey. This new consciousness has the promise of using the *power-with* dynamic to fundamentally transforming the *power-over* dynamic that underlies all sorts of ISMs such as racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism.

Finally, we face the challenge of cultivating transformative capacities for adults. SI intends to build capacities for expanding one's own consciousness as well as others. Skills and capacities associated with each stage of the process -- such as dancing with self and other, process and form, and holding contradictions -- are precisely the ones that come with Robert Kegan's (1994)

5th order consciousness persons, William Torbert's (1991) high quality individuals, and Geneva Gay's (1996) transformative leadership.

Many questions can be raised for or against SI in such facets as the paradigm it is grounded in, its methodological processes and interpretation mechanisms, and its "esoteric" nature. Although all these deserve exploring, one thing seems sure: it is not going to be easy to be accepted by most Westerners, because it goes beyond the predominant Western paradigm. To engage with the SI framework, a significant level of trust and faith has to be in place. However, given learnings from our experimentations in various contexts, it does seem to have a potential.

It is the aim of the SI to trigger, foster, nurture and accelerate expansion of consciousnesses of all kinds including those of transformative learning teachers and researchers. The intention within the SI approach is to expand our consciousnesses so that we can individually and collectively think anew, re-framing the world in ways which can healthily hold the whole together.

### References

Argyris, C. & Schon, D. (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

--- (1996). *Organizational Learning II. Theory, Method and Practice*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.

---. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York: Bantam.

Gay, G. (1996). Transformative leadership for culturally pluralistic realities. *A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership - Sharing the Vision*, 1, 81-90. Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Mezirow, J. & Associates (1990). *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood. A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Tang, Y. (1995). The cultural synergy model: A knowledge tool for the 21st century. Published in the *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Sustainable Civilization*, July 8-10, 1995, Toronto, Canada.

---. (1996). Synergic inquiry and evolution of consciousness. *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution*, 22, 1-19. Tang, Y. & Joiner, C. (1997). *Synergic Inquiry*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Tobert, W.R. (1991). *The power of balance: Transforming self, society, and scientific inquiry*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Vachon, R. (1995). Guswenta or the Intercultural Imperative. *Interculture* XXVIII (2), 8-73.