"Whose Inquiry is this Anyway?"
Money, Power, Reports and Collaborative Inquiry

Elizabeth Kasl
California Institute of Integral Studies

Lyle Yorks
Teachers College, Columbia University

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Abstract: Adult educators who use collaborative/cooperative inquiry (CI) in institutional settings must be aware of potential corrupting influences from money, power and reporting requirements.

The purpose of this paper is to guide adult educators in protecting the integrity of a liberating structure used for both adult learning and formal research. We examine the process of collaborative or cooperative inquiry (CI), which has been advocated by adult educators because it embodies principles commonly associated with ideal conditions for adult learning (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). The problem is that the participatory principles that make CI powerful are at odds with expectations imposed by institutional needs for control and accountability. Institutionally-based adult educators who are attracted to the liberating power, but inexperienced with the methodology, may unwittingly violate its core values and thus diminish its power. In this paper, we describe how educators have addressed the compromising factors of money, power, and reporting requirements when situating CI in institutional settings.

Collaborative or Cooperative Inquiry (CI) as a Liberating Structure

CI is a systematic process in which participants organize themselves into small groups to explore a question that all members find compelling. Using repeated cycles of action and reflection, monitored through robust validity procedures, inquirers examine personal experience in order to create new meaning (Bray, et. al., 2000; Heron, 1996). This inquiry method is particularly useful for pursuing questions that are professionally *and* personally developmental, socially controversial, or require social healing. Research on the process consistently documents its power for personal and social transformation (Reason, 1994; Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

Two core principles define the process (Heron & Reason, 1997) and are also the source of potential dis-ease in institutional settings. The first principle is political: people who participate in the inquiry make *all* decisions — choosing what to study, how to do it, and whether or not to communicate findings to outsiders. The integrity of the process requires that the inquiry group be free from any external requirements. The second principle is epistemic — all knowledge generation grows from participants' personal experience. Group members create authentic experiences and make meaning from these experiences through critical reflexivity. The implications of these principles can be unsettling in an institutional environment.

Challenges to Inquiry Integrity when Situated in Institutional Setting

Nevertheless, the power of CI as a research or learning structure makes it attractive to formal institutions such as universities, foundations or employers. In turn, the resources that institutions can make available to potential inquirers enhance access. The conundrum faced by the adult educator is how to protect a process that is fundamentally averse to outside influence while at the same time taking advantage of the institution's resources and accommodating its vested interests in the quality and outcome of the inquiry.

We examine three factors interjected by institutional affiliation that challenge the integrity of the CI process: financial support, power inequities, and reporting requirements. We examine these factors in different circumstances: inquiries used in the workplace for professional development, inquiries used for dissertations, inquiries that serve an institution's mission.

Professional Development Inquiries Conducted in the Workplace

Each CI initiator approached top decision-makers in the organization to obtain support for inquiries construed as professional development projects that would take place during normal working hours. One of these initiators was a system insider who eventually participated as a peer in the inquiry group; the other was an outsider who facilitated the group that formed.

Nursing managers. Six nursing managers responsible for patient care services at an acute care hospital convened to ask, "How do we communicate in order to promote a culture of mutual respect and cohesiveness among management and staff from all departments, shifts, and facilities?" The group completed eight inquiry cycles, meeting bi-weekly for four hours. To initiate the project, Suzanne Van Stralen (2002, 2003) obtained permission from hospital administration to attend meetings of nursing managers. She described the program to approximately thirty managers in order to recruit a group of six volunteers. Once recruited, the managers negotiated release time with their department heads. The group was free to decide what, if anything, it would share with others about its learning. This arrangement may seem unusual. Van Stralen explains, "because the hospital had been cutting back on training for cost containment reasons, the administration was perhaps particularly open to providing the nursing managers with access to this opportunity. Further, my previous work [as a consultant] within the system afforded me credibility, and I offered my services without compensation" (2002, p.14).

High school teachers. High school teachers in a rural upstate New York school district posed the question, "How can we improve our practice?" Project initiator John Bray (1995) approached the school superintendent with the proposition that meaningful learning would result from teachers taking responsibility for their own professional development. Bray negotiated release time so that participating teachers could meet all day once a month in a local conference facility. In addition to paying for substitute teachers and meeting space, the superintendent also provided a modest budget for books or other materials. Bray described the CI process at the beginning of the academic year, inviting all teachers to participate. Eight volunteered.

Observations about money, power, and reports. Although both inquiries were used for dissertation research, our focus here is on the impact of workplace context. In each example, cost to the organization in actual dollars was minimal. Although both employers provided release time, only the teacher inquiry required additional outlay. In each case, the project initiator sold top administrators on the value of CI and secured agreement that there would be no formal requirements for reports or other outcome measures. To secure this good-faith agreement, both Van Stralen and Bray depended on personal credibility within the system as well as arguments that CI would pay off in significant learning and good will far exceeding the modest cost. Although neither group created written reports, both were motivated to share their new knowledge. The nursing managers were so enthusiastic about learning to be more holistic in their relationships with one another and with those they supervised that they lobbied top administration for a hospital-wide employee appreciation day, which they planned and facilitated as a culminating action inspired by their inquiry. The high school teachers conceptualized actions designed to build community in the school. Collaboratively, the group wrote a letter to the board of education. Three group members then attended a board meeting in which they reported the group's actions for community building as well as the value of the inquiry experience.

Inquiries Conducted as Dissertation Research

We now examine institutional issues related to dissertation research. We base our observations on our personal experience as well as on knowledge generated at the University of Bath, where graduate students' culminating projects use action research, including cooperative inquiry (see: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/actionprog/index.html).

A range of topics and strategies. In our introduction, we mentioned that CI is useful for pursuing questions that are professionally *and* personally developmental, socially controversial, or require social healing. Examples that illustrate these multiple purposes include: Jewish women activists who learned about their own internalized anti-Semitism and experimented with how to heal it (Rosenwasser, 2002, 2005); white people who raised their awareness about white privilege and learned to be more effective in acting for racial justice (Paxton, 2003); community women diverse in race, education, and language who valorized expert knowledge, but learned from their inquiry to trust personal knowledge construction as well as their collective ability to teach others about diversity (Smith, 1995, 2002); organization development specialists who improved their capacities to use non-hierarchical methods for facilitating groups (Sartor, 1998); young women managers who learned to engage the challenges of a difficult corporate culture (McCardle, 2004); professional administrators from a variety of for-profit and not-for-profit settings who learned how to lead holistically and create a more wholesome balance in work and personal life (Mankey, 2007); a cross-disciplinary group of professionals who enhanced their understanding of how to manifest the energetic quality of group coherence (Zweig, 2007).

Some dissertation researchers used CI as the method for studying a topic of intense personal interest (Mankey, 2007; Rosenwasser, 2005; Sartor, 1998; Zweig, 2007). Others used the inquiry group's experience for the purpose of studying process. For example, Van Stralen (2003), Bray (1995), Smith (1995) and Paxton (2003) all conducted case studies in which they analyzed how the CI process fosters adult learning. McArdle (2004) studied the action research process primarily from her personal perspective as a first-time facilitator.

Observations about money, power, and reports. Both strategies present problems. For the student who wants to use CI as a research method, the two core principles are at odds with academic tradition. The epistemic principle dictates primacy of the inquirers' personal experience. The reason for conducting the research is personal interest; validity of outcomes is tested by participants' ability to take more skillful action based on knowledge created during multiple cycles of action and reflection. As a consequence, there is no natural role for academic literature — either in the form of a review that situates the research problem or as a gauge for success in adding new knowledge to academic discourse. CI's political principle is similarly difficult. It dictates that inquirers make all decisions related to the inquiry. As a consequence, neither the research question nor its procedures can be included in the student's research proposal. Further, the group's findings should be written by the group itself, only if the group has an interest in doing so. One strategy for wrestling with the challenge of protecting CI's integrity while meeting academic expectations is to embed description of the inquiry method and findings in a larger personal inquiry, where the doctoral student relates the inquiry topic and findings to scholarly literature (Mankey, 2007; Rosenwasser, 2005). Another is to include a written report from the group in the final dissertation. For example, Sartor's group created a model describing the conditions, skills, and indicators of non-hierarchical facilitation. Sartor (1998) arranged to copyright the model under the names of all the inquirers and included it in her dissertation. As part of her contract with participants, Zweig (2007) obtained commitment to spend three months

in inquiry and three more in writing results. At its own decision, the group spent six months in inquiry and eighteen months writing findings through a remarkable process of consensus writing that the group created after months of experimentation with strategies for being fully inclusive. These findings, under the names of all the inquirers, comprise a chapter in the final document.

By designing a traditional case study, the doctoral student can avoid conundrums created by CI's epistemic and political principles. Nevertheless, the project will forge an uneasy relationship with the basic value espoused repeatedly by CI proponents, which is "research should be *with* people, not *on* them" (Bray et.al., 2000; Heron, 1996; Reason, 1994).

The doctoral student researcher must struggle with the way the context of dissertation research affects the inquirers. Making the transition from project initiator to full peer in the inquiry group always requires considerable finesse (Bray et.al., 2000; Heron, 1996). Groups typically defer to the initiator despite that initiator's efforts to divest herself or himself of any special leadership functions. These difficulties are exacerbated when the person attempting this transition is a dissertation researcher. In almost all cases, participants voice their concern, "Are you getting what you need for your dissertation?" This concern can also prevail even when the doctoral student participates as an outside facilitator rather than a full peer inquirer.

Inquiries Sponsored by an Institution that Serve the Institution's Mission

Organizations can turn to CI to serve their own mission. We describe two examples: a school district using CI to provide opportunity for professional development and a university providing students and community residents with opportunity for personal growth.

School district and professional development. The teachers, whose inquiry is described above, became so visible in their school system that other teachers clamored for the same opportunity. In a subsequent year, Bray coordinated a CI project in which five different groups formed, each choosing its own inquiry question. Teachers from the original project dispersed among the new groups, thus providing knowledge about how to carry out the CI method. The district provided the same financial support. Although no formal reporting was required, the superintendent in this small community felt he was informed about the project's quality through informal interactions with teachers as he encountered them in his daily routine (Bray, 2002).

Academic program and education about white privilege. In service of its academic requirement that students demonstrate cultural competence, the transformative learning doctoral program at the California Institute of Integral Studies created an opportunity for white students to participate in CI groups where the topic was designated as white privilege, but each group developed its own research question. Students could earn academic credit or could use the project to fulfill the cultural competence requirement without earning credit and paying tuition. Groups were open to the community and several people participated who were either students from other academic programs or community residents who had no affiliation with the school. The project lasted three years, fielding fifteen different groups with an average size of five persons. Of the 70 participants, only 18 registered for academic credit. The transformative learning program contracted with the registrar to prevent courses from being cancelled for low enrollment. With one exception, groups met for the entire academic year. The transformative learning program hired an adjunct instructor who was experienced with CI and highly skilled in living its participatory principles. She created an infrastructure that honored group privacy and autonomy while also allowing her to track the learning, especially of those registered for academic credit. Some features of the infrastructure included: monthly reflection papers from students receiving credit, an end-of-semester report from each group, access to private electronic conferences that provided quick communication among participants and also with the

coordinator, a steering committee comprised of one representative from each group that met monthly with the coordinator to keep her informed and seek her advice. In addition, this committee planned a culminating event in which groups shared their learning (European Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2002).

Observations about money, power, and reports. One of CI's defining criteria is that it be voluntary. Both institutions offered their CI projects as opportunities but not requirements. They stepped outside their usual operating norms by foregoing formal reports as a way of exercising accountability. In the white privilege project, the institution made special accommodation with its registration procedures. Perhaps this willingness to relax procedural norms is related to the two organizations' relatively small size. In each case, the projects were advocated passionately from within the system — teachers themselves who wanted to experience CI after observing how their colleagues had benefited and the transformative learning doctoral program, with its strong commitment to both cultural consciousness and action research methodologies.

Conclusion

Observations in this paper are derived from our shared experiences with CI in various settings. These experiences point to a movement toward using CI within institutional contexts as both a research method and a strategy for learning and development. We believe this movement holds opportunities for reinforcing values of democratic empowerment while providing powerful learning spaces for desperately needed competencies and new knowledge. This potential is particularly relevant and rich for schools of professional practice in higher education. However, this potential can only be realized if the epistemology of CI is adopted and not co-opted by institutions. We have highlighted some of the fault lines that mark this distinction. These fault lines become more intense as institutions adopt CI as part of their formal research mission. If accompanied by authentic reflexivity about inquiry there are opportunities for transformative institutional and societal learning. As the above examples suggest, when people show up differently in their organizations there is ripple effect on the institution. It is, however, impossible to predict what that effect will be. Hence the need for authentic, critical reflexivity.

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