

# **A ‘Developmental Action Inquiry’ Approach To Teaching First-, Second-, and Third-Person Action Research Methods**

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In this chapter, we suggest that it is only through action and inquiry processes such as those enacted by developmental action inquiry (DAI) (Torbert, 1976, 1987, 1991; Torbert & Associates, 2004) that education, work, and leisure actually become mutually transforming and thus truly integral. In support of this assertion, the introductory section offers, first, brief descriptions of three integral qualities of DAI not focused on by other developmental approaches (e.g. Kegan, 1994; Wilber 2000). Second, we suggest the sources of these three qualities by summarizing Bill (Torbert)’s career of spiritual, educational, and managerial research, teaching, consulting, and leadership. Then, in the main body of the chapter, we introduce Bill and Erica (Steckler)’s work together as teacher and student in a PhD-level course in Action Research Methods (ARM) and later as increasingly peer-like co-authors of this chapter. We offer a close description of a few events that occurred during the course that reflect how an action inquiry approach can generate individual, group, and organizational learning and transformational development toward integrity and mutuality among participants.

The three qualities of integral theory, personal practice, and educational organizing essential to the praxis of DAI are:

- 1) Playful *first-person efforts to expand and deepen one’s attention to encompass four “territories of experience” simultaneously* (Torbert, 1972) and to establish alignment or integrity among them. These four territories constitute the full aesthetic continuum of the attention: our individual apprehension of *the outside world*, sentience of the living being’s *own embodiment and performance*, discernment of one’s *feeling/interpreting/strategizing*, and regardfulness for the dynamic quality and *source of attention itself*.
- 2) Leaderly *second-person initiatives to create communities of inquiry* where the individual members and the community as a whole are guided, not just by single-loop incremental feedback from a hierarchical superior, but also by double-loop transforming feedback (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Argyris, Putnam

& Smith, 1985) and by triple-loop presencing and re-aligning feedback (Senge et al, 2004; Scharmer, 2007) from their peers and from organizational superiors acting in a peer-like fashion.

- 3) Liberating *third-person disciplines* (Torbert, 1991) that foster the interweaving in everyday life of first-, second-, and third-person action inquiries.

The long-term, fundamental aims of each of these modes of DAI is to increase first-person integrity, second-person mutuality, and third-person transformational sustainability. Although DAI is based not only on the action and inquiry methods just mentioned and elaborated below, but also on developmental theory (McGuire, Palus & Torbert, 2007]), we choose not to mention the specific, sequential developmental action-logics in this chapter, in order to highlight the importance of action practices and research inquiries in generating developmental transformations.

The main body of this chapter is about the Action Research Methods (ARM) PhD course and will illustrate in detail how first-, second-, and third-person action and inquiry can interweave to generate single-, double-, and triple-loop feedback that aligns the four territories of experience in real-time to help participants increasingly develop and integrate skills, capacities, and awarenesses as both researchers and leaders. The amalgamation of this intentional, multidimensional individual and shared development can in turn transform the given organization (in this case the PhD course in ARM) beyond a typical ‘community of practice’ (that helps members become more competent in a pre-defined arena, primarily through single-loop feedback) toward a true ‘community of inquiry’ (that helps members develop new capacities and worldviews, as well as new competences, through single-, double-, and triple-loop feedback).

In order to give these extremely abstract concepts a little initial embodiment, we begin by briefly tracing the wide variety of organizational settings in which Bill Torbert first learned and later guided significant attempts at integrating learning, productivity and transformational development in education and business. Starting in early adulthood, Bill’s most significant learning organizations included the first-person research/practices of the Gurdjieff Work (Ouspensky, 1949) (in which he participated from 1964 – 1989), where he studied the interplay among his perceptions of the outside world, his bodily sensations as he acted, and his emotions and thinking, all through cultivating a trans-cognitive attention. At the same time, he engaged repeatedly in the second-person research/practices of various group dynamics approaches (Tavistock, Bethel, Esalen), where he studied how one’s own speaking and timing and leadership action can help shape the vision, strategies, norms, and levels of trust and inquiry of teams with whom one is working or playing. As well, he sought mastery of third-person research/practice skills in social science at the Yale PhD program in Individual and Organizational behavior, where he studied how quantitative, qualitative, and action research can interweave to help larger organizations and institutions transform.

Torbert’s later educational experiments in generating integral education for others as well as himself included the directorship of the Yale Upward Bound War on Poverty program for high school students (1966-68) (Torbert, 1976), as well as the creation of an action-and-reflection-oriented entrepreneurship course for 400 undergraduate students at a time at the Southern Methodist University Business School (1970-72) and for 100+ graduate students at a time at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (1972-76). These experiments resulted in the gradual creation and articulation of “liberating

disciplines” (Torbert, 1991), a kind of organizing that simultaneously supports and challenges participants and the organization as a whole to develop toward becoming a true community of inquiry.

Still later, as dean of the Boston College MBA program, Torbert’s focus shifted to institutionalizing and sustaining a transformational program within a relatively conservative, conventional university (Torbert, 1987). Next, he took a number of long-term consulting roles aimed at generating both personal and organizational developmental transformation in business and not-for-profit settings (Fisher & Torbert, 1995; Torbert & Associates, 2004; Rooke & Torbert, 2005), in order to learn more about the developmental timing of interventions meant to influence others’ first-, second-, and third-person action inquiry.

### **The Action Research Methods Course**

Finally, as Director of the PhD program in Organizational Transformation, Torbert generated a core PhD course in Action Research Methods (ARM) at Boston College’s (BC) Organization Studies Department, teaching it until his retirement in 2008. This was one of a small handful of action research courses taught in the U.S., with the explicit intention of simultaneously supporting students’ intellectual, experiential, and practical development through the building and ever-evolving reconstruction of liberating disciplines. The result is an existentially challenging setting in which students assume more leadership responsibility than usual and the teacher is more transparent about his or her own learning than usual, as will be illustrated below. Students and leaders stumble across learning challenges and opportunities in real time that can cross-pollinate and transform the “I,” “We,” “It,” and “Its” quadrants referred to in integral education (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007). We illustrate DAI in practice in this chapter by retelling and analyzing one version of this ARM course.

Erica took the ARM class as a requirement of the first year of her doctoral study. She had known very little about the course or the method prior to reading the syllabus on the first day of class. Ultimately much of the method resonated with Erica, who has appreciated the integration of multiple experiential dimensions including awareness, inquiry, integrity, reflection, action, testing, expression, effectiveness, and learning enacted in the present, individually and with others, with a transformational intention. She found herself creatively and developmentally inspired by the first, second, and third person research practices that she developed over the semester, so she volunteered to co-author this chapter thereafter.

Because the course includes autobiographical writing, audio-recordings and selected transcriptions of class meetings, as well as individual and group-oriented study and reflection by students and leaders as it proceeds, it is possible to convey up-close what this embodiment of integral education involves in particular instances. The course experience we highlight in this chapter involves fewer than ten participants, including BC members required to take the course and members from neighboring universities electing to take the course.

The syllabus for the ARM course is arranged in four subsections – Mission, Strategies, Practices, and Assessments – that reflect the “four territories of experience.” It begins with the following statement of Mission that also reflects the four territories of experience:

- I. Wonder-full listening***
- II. Presencing theorizing***
- III. Timely, transforming acting, and***
- IV. Mutually inquiring and empowering researching/assessing  
of validity, efficacy, integrity, mutuality, sustainability, and justice***

In the syllabus, Bill notes that this mission is “pre-formulated by the professor” and asks “how does it ring to you?” The class noted that this mission sounds slightly mysterious, as well as somewhat more experiential and action-oriented than a typical course mission. We discussed the unusual overarching course goal of introducing members to, and co-creating a space to practice and question together, a theory that supposedly makes each of us and the collective group more aware in the present of our attention, thinking, and action, and the integration of all of these with the world around us. Further, we talked about how the goal of developmental action inquiry is to enable us to find and enact truths in a timely fashion. Overall, we converged around accepting this pre-formulated mission (all this based on Erica’s class notes).

In the next section of the syllabus, Strategies, the first strategy is entitled “Treating the class as a real-time research/practice process” and describes how every class will be recorded, with participant-leaders taking turns partially transcribing as well as leading a meeting, and writing a 2<sup>nd</sup>-person research paper about that meeting and the ones leading up to it, to be shared and discussed with all the other participants.

The second strategy is entitled “Confidentiality, transparency, and accountability” and includes never identifying any other member of the course in any recounting of course events with persons who are not course members. This rule also applies to members of the course who may later choose to write about it for publication, and these members are asked to share a draft of the paper with other course members prior to publication. This strategy is in effect in this chapter – members are not identified in recounting events and are instead referred to by pseudonyms, and a draft of the paper has been shared with all of them.

The third strategy describes the regular “Activities outside class time,” including the three papers to be written during the semester: an autobiographical, first-person paper about each participant’s developmental evolution up to the present, with next steps; a second-person paper about the class meetings, already described; and, at the end of the semester, a potentially publishable third-person paper about this kind of research (see, for example, Hartwell & Torbert, 1999; Chandler & Torbert, 2003).

The section of the syllabus on Practices gives the weekly schedule of readings, with the final weeks of assignments blank, in anticipation of co-structuring the assignments by then. The Assessments section of the syllabus indicates that there will be a grade for each of the three papers given by the instructor (25% each), a participation grade developed so as to provide feedback to each participant about others’ assessments (25%), and the opportunity for members to challenge and re-construct the grading process as a whole, if they wish. Our class ultimately opted not to re-construct the grading process, although there was brief discussion about how we might and if other classes had. Finally, a bibliography of major contemporary volumes related to action research is appended to the syllabus, including the following: Argyris, 1971; Bernstein, 1985; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991; Wilber, 1998; Sherman

& Torbert, 2000; Ogilvy, 2002; Hallward, 2003; Lundberg & Young, 2005; Shani et al., 2007; Scharmer, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008.

As the syllabus is reviewed and discussed during the first meeting, course members quickly become aware that they will play a number of risk-taking, leadership roles in the class that include the following opportunities for developing first- and second-person research practices: 1) writing and analyzing their autobiographies early in the semester (to be shared only with the instructor, unless a given student later chooses to share with others); 2) leading at least one class each after the instructor leads the first two; and 3) writing second-person papers about the class they lead, to be shared with and discussed with the rest of the class the week afterwards. As a starting point, the instructor suggests a ten page minimum for the autobiography (some papers are as short as 15 or 20 pages, but most students write far longer, from 30 to 200 pages). The following short excerpts from one such autobiography provide a flavor of the openness and intimacy with which students write in their first-person voices. This person had tried to “charm her way out of” (her phrasing) an assignment everyone had: to lead the class for one session. So, Torbert invited her to write autobiographically on the theme of power (and she later gave her permission for the essay, or excerpts, to be used for research and educational purposes). Here is a little of what she wrote:

*Power is a funny word. It can conjure up many different thoughts and emotions. Many people shudder over the traditional definition of power in its most unilateral sense. Others rejoice over the thought of power as a mutually transforming process. When you first said (and later repeated in different ways) that a consultant must become comfortable with the issue of power and capable of helping to transform how power is understood and exercised in organizations, I thought, “Then consulting is not the field for me.”*

*Through the course of this class with you Bill, I have been forced to face my own negative view of power head on. It has been a somewhat uncomfortable journey, one I have only recently felt that importance of...*

*(After writing about the positive kinds of power her parents exercised...) While it sounds like an idyllic childhood, power did not always have a positive influence upon me growing up. I completely resented my brother’s use of power within our family. However unconscious and not intentional it was, his actions were a great force. He unilaterally transformed our family from an almost idyllic way of life to a living hell. My parents were constantly consumed with his problems, were constantly yelling at him and changing plans to accommodate Sandy. I remember lying awake at night listening to them yell. It happened more often than I even care to mention. He even robbed me of my sleep. My brother’s use of power was even more directly felt by my sister and I through repeated rounds of being hit in my stomach. As I am writing this I am feeling the disgust and anxiety, still, throughout my whole body. I remember, like it was yesterday, the feeling of having the wind knocked out of me due to a sharp punch.*

*In addition to this relationship with my brother, which has tainted my feelings towards power, I have, several times, put myself in situations where I experienced a complete loss of power. One of these was the loss of a child that I was pregnant with at a very young age. Another was an assault that happened while I was under the influence of alcohol and was powerless to defend myself...*

*So I have lived through some positive experiences of power and some quite negative ones. Where am I now? I think it depends upon the realm of my life that I am examining. One thing this organizational development class has taught me is that I am a very different person in different areas of my life.*

This kind of first-person research and expression in developmental action inquiry tracks quite well to the Interior-Individual, or “I,” quadrant of the Integral model of education (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007), tapping into the self and consciousness through contemplation and critical reflection on personal and interpersonal experiences. After participants write an initial story-draft of their life, the instructor offers detailed written feedback, including questions about how different life events may suggest certain developmental action-logics or moments of transformation between action-logics (Torbert & Fisher, 1992). Understanding how a difficult time in one’s life (or a difficult theme, such as inclusion or power or intimacy) may have represented a conflict between action-logics can lead to a deepening self-acceptance, as well as to more active inquiry and greater openness to whatever one’s own and others’ current transforming edge is. Thus, this first-person paper tends to become much more than an exercise in using case study data to test a theory. If there is sufficient trust between the instructor and the participant, and if the participant takes sufficient initiative, the participant can use the rest of the course as a primary site for experimenting toward enacting a personal double-loop transformation from one action-logic to another.

The DAI approach to teaching and action researching also embodies an integral theory of education through second- and third-person research methods. The remainder of this chapter focuses on three separate incidents of second-person research that highlight the participants’ transformational processes in the “We/You” quadrant of integral education (and notice that even the particular autobiographical excerpt we have shared was influenced by a second-person event in the class). First, we will share how our group stumbled on a learning moment related to how membership commitment, inclusion, and in-group/out-group norms can develop in a community of inquiry.

### **Incident I – Inclusion: The Volunteers vs. the Draftees?**

On the day he took the lead in generating the class agenda and guiding the class meeting, Bob (all names except our own are pseudonyms) invited us to explore ideas of membership and commitment to our evolving community of inquiry. Bob’s inspiration for this focused exploration was based on an exchange in an earlier class between himself (a student at another area university who had elected the course) and Jim, a BC PhD student who was required to take the course. Bob had been “inviting” Jim to participate more fully, trying to demonstrate the advantages of engaging in a deeper inquiry together, in line with becoming “a community of inquiry.” But Jim had resisted “buying in,” generating a sense of tension between the two. In this class, Bob was again raising the

issue, but this time with the aim of understanding “where we want to go forward as a group,” when Jim enters the conversation:

**Jim:** *First of all, just some background here. Bob and Sue, you are volunteers for this class. You are here because this is something you want to learn. You think this is something important. I am a draftee. I'm here because they will not give me a Ph.D., unless I pass this class and pass the comprehensive exam. It is not a course that I would decide to take otherwise. It's not something that I think should be a requirement, but it is. And I have this feeling that because of the nature of this action research course and how you're supposed to participate here and write your papers that I'm sort of in a position having to hand over a part of my life that I do not want to hand over in order to do well...*

*...(and) I was being asked sequentially by the three people who felt the most empowered by this (Bob, Sue, and Bill T.) to justify myself. And I was the person who felt the least empowered and who was sort of being offered the role of this anti-action research guy in the class. And that bothered me a lot...*

*... And so I left class and I thought about it too much and I got kind of freaked out about it. It all boils down to I felt like I was being singled out. And so I guess my question here is, and this may be my learning goal, is that given all the things I said about my connection and disconnection from the class, how am I supposed to participate in the full transparent level that everything I read in this class tells me I'm suppose to participate in? You know, not hurt the group by being withdrawn from it or anything like that.*

**Bill:** *Well, one of things that struck me is that you don't affect me as the least participative person in class and in fact, you repeatedly raise significant issues. And here you are now sort of whole-heartedly entering into this and sharing what you actually felt between classes. So I don't feel like it's necessary to coerce you to do anything more. In fact, one of the things strikes me when I think about it is, gosh, you've been present in several different ways, somewhat critically. If we cannot accept a critical voice in here, then we are really in trouble as far as creating a community of inquiry is concerned. So, I don't know. I mean, I don't myself experience you as required to do more.*

**Bob:** *On that point, first I'm really grateful that you share this. I'm asking myself why did I go back again. You said you felt irritated. And maybe I have the sense that I know better and am therefore trying to ask you what is your problem, what is it that you're not getting here. I'm questioning myself whether I have that frame. Maybe I... maybe I do.  
[Pause]*

**Sue:** *I really appreciate this discussion, because I think a lot of what we've been talking about is the difference between our intention and the impact we are actually having on the group. We've just heard all these different perspectives. From you, Bob, on what your intention is and you are getting some feedback in various ways about the impact you're actually having. And you are just talking about a particular intention you are coming from. But it had a certain kind of impact.*

In his second-person paper, Bob offers a careful analysis of his *intended results* when he had originally been speaking with Jim and of the *actual impact* he had on Jim. Then he analyzes of his own *specific actions*, as well as the *assumptions* that generated his actions. Finally, he offers what assumptions he would like to make and what actions he would like to take in the future. At the conclusion of the paper, Bob summarizes his central insights into the *actual assumptions* he had been operating from in the original conversation:

*[Bob] This session has had a profound impact on me personally. I have learned to see many blind-spots I was not aware of until now and have transcended single-loop thinking into double-loop thinking. I really appreciate that Jim put himself out to share with us how he really felt in class. Before that, I believed religiously that action inquiry must be good for all, and had no idea of the kind of coercive effect the group can have on people, (mostly generated by me), and the potential damage that comes with it. My prior single-loop thinking included believing single-mindedly in the benefits of a community of inquiry (COI) without questioning its potential harm to people. I never questioned the goal of creating a COI (the why), I was only concerned about how to create it. When I saw a member not benefiting from it as much, I mistakenly thought it must be his fault and that only if I can help him to see its value, will he enjoy it and learn from it as much as I do. This is typical single-loop thinking where I try to influence people's behavior in order to achieve a fixed goal.*

We can see that although Bob had originally imagined that Jim required a double-loop change of perspective (or frame or assumptions), it is Bob himself who ultimately recognizes that his perspective or frame calls for a double-loop change, if he is in fact going to be an effective agent of a community of inquiry. The norms of a community of inquiry cannot be established by fiat – by implicitly hierarchical, dualistic thinking and acting, which can only result in unquestioned norms, declining trust, and unmanageable conflict – but only by a vulnerable, dialectical self-disclosing inquiry process that Jim is in fact the first to model in the interactions we have just reviewed, and that Bob then enacts in his second-person research paper. More generally, there is no mechanical, general way of creating a community of inquiry; it must be constructed from the materials and limitations of each distinct situation by an increasingly conscious, skillful, and, above all, truly mutual action inquiry process among the participants.

### **Incident II – Control: The Instructor vs. the Students?**

The incident we highlight next deals with an observation of an initial power dynamic that one of the members of this evolving community of inquiry brought our attention to in a second-person research paper, informed by transcription of an audio recording of class, as well as jotted class and journal notes during the two weeks leading up to the paper. The budding researcher/practitioner tried “...to be aware of not just *what* people were saying, but *how* they were saying things.” The particular issue of control was raised in terms of describing the actual physical setting for one particular class. It was one of the first moves by a student to confront, albeit indirectly, issues of institutionalized power and control, and it opened the doors for further inquiry and



mutuality-building among our members. In particular, the inquiry deals with the degree to which the instructor is genuinely sharing control of the class as a whole and to what degree he is actually exerting as much or more unilateral power than a typical professor.

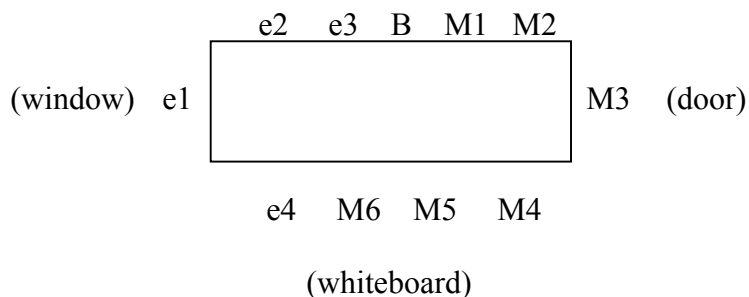
Consistent with the principles of action inquiry that help cultivate single, double and triple-loop feedback (Torbert, 2004), this section is structured by Erica, with opportunity for Bill to respond. This example of inquiry-in-action is also consistent with a key assumption of integral theory that multiple ways of knowing occur through participatory relationships and a variety of inquiry methods (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007). The student-researcher's statement of intention at the outset of this second-person paper reads:

*My goal for observing, listening, and assessing our... class session is to discover moments and spaces of group development and challenges, and to explore these together as we pursue our shared commitment to mutual, empowering learning and transformational growth in our group research.*

The following excerpt and typical seating chart provide the basis for class consideration of (and now readers' attention to) the power and control dynamic within this potential community of inquiry.

*...Bill typically indicates available and desirable seating positions by placing piles of handouts in particular locations. It seems like Bill's intent is to get us into a more circular and less-dispersed configuration. Although I now expect these piles of handouts that indicate a preferred seating configuration, this imposed structure has felt a little suspect to me, a little off-putting, given the relatively free-sit norms that have emerged in my other classes. I do see the value in closer seating arrangements, and any initial reaction has so far subsided immediately once discussion gets under way.*

### Typical ARM Seating Arrangement



Note: B = Bill; M1 = member 1; M2 = member 2, etc.; e1-e4 = empty seats.

As a result of the timely sharing of this observation with the group, our awareness shifted to consider the application of status-based power, or institutionalized control, in terms of a preferred seating schema imposed by someone who arguably should be an equal-status participant. Upon reflection, the irony of the presence of a “legitimate” leader, in this case one who is institutionally appointed, in a transformationally oriented self-study group that is explicitly modeled after a peer-like community of inquiry cannot be ignored. While each member agreed, to one extent or another, to play at this task of creating a community of inquiry in which mutuality, integrity, and sustainability are expected outcomes of the process, Bill’s presence as professor-expert-evaluator – in addition to the requirement for four out of six of us to take the course – makes it easy to interpret our gatherings for learning and development as fundamentally coerced, which undermines the voluntariness, mutuality, and trust at the very core of a community of inquiry. While Bill often switched sides of the table every couple of weeks (and notably he never positioned himself at the “head” of the table), and members were free to sit in front of whatever pile of handouts we wished, our compact seating configuration, typically oriented around the door-side of the table, was strongly influenced by Bill’s piles. There was no spreading out, no empty seats in between. What if one of us had resisted or refused to sit in front of one of the piles of articles that Bill placed neatly at desirable seating locations around the table? Most likely, Bill would have noticed early on in the class and asked us to move back into his ideal, tightly configured arrangement. I’m not sure that any of us would have challenged his subtle but obvious authority in the classroom, and therefore in our community, in that event.

Another facet of the challenge of power is that even when the opportunity to share power is offered, as when Bill offered the opportunity to revise the suggested grading process, it is not always accepted in whole or even in part, as when the group did not suggest or pursue changes in the assessment system. Further, no one challenged the fact that this course met for one extra hour each week than other comparable 3-credit classes (and had been doing so throughout its history). In fact, despite awareness and discussion of the seating pattern generated by the instructor’s initiative, the pattern did not change very much thereafter.

The important implication here is that even if Bill was not exercising control, there may be manipulative elements from the simple fact of his position of authority that ultimately have retrogressive effects. Although student-members became more empowered over the semester – manifest in more generative and collaborative development of the class-to-class agendas, with increasing numbers of the topics discussed influenced by what the student-researchers chose to focus on in their second-person research papers, and later in choosing readings for the last several class meetings – Bill’s leadership of the class remained something that we all negotiated to find an appropriate, palatable balance between unilateral and mutual control.

Here begins Bill’s rejoinder on this critical issue of power and control in a group that is convening to some degree because of members’ pre-defined institutional roles, status, and legitimate power and to some degree because of their dedication to becoming a more mutual community of inquiry in which the very issue of what kind of power is being exercised how and by whom becomes discussable and transformable. First, as Erica’s prior comments indicate, I did share power with the class in a variety of ways and offered to share power in even more ways than the class took up. Second, I did not

hesitate to exercise power myself (for I wished us to become mutually empowered, not mutually unempowered), and my intent when exercising power was to create conditions for increasingly mutual exercises of power. Third and as an example of the prior point, with regard to my initiatives to influence the seating arrangement, I had only two motives that I was and am aware of: 1) I wished to model the fact that a meeting leader can influence the quality of the meeting by considering the physical arrangements as well as by planning the intellectual and emotional discussion topics and research exercises (and I hoped that the student meeting leaders, either through implicit mimicry or through explicit discussion, would gradually choose to exercise such power as well); and 2) in the early sessions, I wished to seat myself more on the edge of the group than in the center (as the seating chart shows), in order to make it easier for the conversation *not* to focus around me. Fourth, when Erica speculates that if a member of the group had contested my seating suggestions I would likely have “asked (them) to move back into (my) ideal, tightly configured arrangement,” I am quite confident she is wrong, given the motives I’ve just described. Instead, I would want to use the contestation over my “power move” to increase our ongoing awareness of the power issues at stake and whether each such exercise of power increases or diminishes trust, mutuality, and inquiry.

Returning to a joint authorial voice, we agree that, although one can offer some general answers to the question of how power is generated and used to create a community of inquiry, none of these general answers are of any use if the actors in the specific group are not awake to the “dance of power” being enacted whenever the group is meeting. In general, groups are initially constituted by a larger organization based on some taken-for-granted pre-definitions of mission, membership, roles, and power-distribution. Under such circumstances, power is likely to be hierarchically distributed and exercised in a relatively unilateral, uninquiring fashion. Subordinate members may passively accept their relatively dependent, low power roles, or may passive-aggressively express counter-dependent de-commitment while remaining official group members. The official leadership may either defend its unilateral power and punish expressions of creative, independent power, or it may use its power to support low-power members to act with increasing independence (as we believe Bill did when he supported Jim’s role as an active critic of the group purpose and process). No one can unilaterally transform anyone else from dependence through counter-dependence and independence to inter-independence.

In action inquiry, an important practice is to observe when and how power is being exercised. Doing so creates a space for reflection and potential double and triple loop learning whereby the exercise of power becomes increasingly mutual. A full-fledged peer community of inquiry can evolve only gradually through making the difficult issues of membership, power, and intimacy discussible and transformable. Over the ten years of the Action Research Methods course, about half the students have chosen voluntarily to create small action inquiry groups the following year, and some of these continued meeting for many years. In effect, because the course is required of some of its participants, a full-fledged community of inquiry is likely to evolve only after the formal conclusion of the course. To conclude this discussion of the exercise of power in the ARM course, we believe that second-person research in the midst of practice in the present that makes the actual power relationships in the setting discussible and

transformable is a *sine qua non* of truly integral education that supports human and organizational development beyond dependence and independence to inter-independence.

### **Incident III – Between-Member Conflict and Transformation**

The third set of incidents from the ARM class that we focus on concern issues of feedback and intimacy among the members. Nadine, one of the “draftees,” had shifted from a low participation mode after a class in which she presented a difficult conversation between her and one of her apartment-mates. She was unquestioningly clear that the difficulties were caused by the apartment-mate, until another member of the class pointed out succinctly how she was acting toward the apartment-mate in precisely the same way as she was complaining her apartment-mate was acting toward her. Immediately thunderstruck by the truth of this critique (perhaps the purest and most consequential piece of triple-loop feedback sent and received in the same moment in the course), Nadine reported the following week that she had excised the tension and transformed the relationship the evening after the class session.

This experience led Nadine to experiment with more direct feedback to every other class member in her second-person research paper a few weeks later (and both experiences led her to write a third-person paper about the kind of experiences that can transform a person from feeling like a draftee to feeling like a volunteer). In particular, she shared her own personal observations and reflections about the personal learning goals for the rest of the course that other members of our community had expressed in the prior session. When Sue read Nadine’s comments the day before the next class, she felt negatively evaluated by Nadine’s comments about the personal goals Sue had shared with the group. The following excerpts are from a series of emails that were made public in our class, and that eventually precipitated a conflict-confrontation exercise that Bill suggested and facilitated.

*“Hi Everyone,  
Please find my second person paper attached... I hope you will find it useful – I have made a lot of assumptions in my analysis of our conversation and I hope it will be taken in the spirit intended -- to be helpful and constructive and to generate further discussion.  
Looking fwd to see you all on Wednesday!!  
Best,  
Nadine”*

*“Hey Nadine,  
Your analysis generally made me feel misunderstood and the object of unfounded assumptions/projections, which makes it less safe to share things like personal goals in the first place...”*

Sue goes on over the course of two or so pages to identify specific problematic clauses and assumptions from Nadine’s second person paper, and responds to each of these by clarifying what the actual intentions and assumptions guiding these goals actually were. She evaluates Nadine’s feedback as “unskillful,” and requests that Nadine approach observation and reflection with more “curiosity and generosity” and fewer “meandering

assumptions.” Sue concludes this email with an invitation to discuss the issues with Nadine further.

Nadine responds:

*“Hi [Sue],*

*I must admit I was a little surprised at your email. Honestly, I didn’t mean to be overly harsh...If you don’t feel that what I wrote was representative of your motives, then you are totally free to disregard my comments! Seriously, it’s fine. But, I’m sure it would be an interesting topic to discuss in class tomorrow...you can surely use that forum to make yourself more understood...clearly what I took away from our talk is not the message you sent/intended.*

*In any case, you are totally right that I could have been more curious and generous about my assumptions. Guess it’s a learning process.”*

Sue responds:

*“Hi [Nadine],*

*I’m sure you didn’t mean to be harsh, but what you said did come across (at least to me) as you engaged in your own private exercise of projecting motivations or assumptions onto me. And that’s what I’m objecting to. Of course, as you point out, I am free to disregard your comments. But that doesn’t seem to me to be a helpful way to think about this because it doesn’t address the fact that your comments have an impact – both on me personally and on how you come across to me.”*

Sue closes this final email by agreeing that the topic would be interesting to discuss in class, and asks permission of Nadine bring the email exchange to class the next day.

When this email interaction is presented to the class, Bill suggests a possible “liberating discipline” that he calls an “angel” exercise, whereby Nadine and Sue can talk about their conflict in the class, with two other members serving as “angels” for each. The “angels” can speak as Nadine or Sue over their shoulders, in an effort to get at underlying issues and perhaps diffuse some of the one-on-one personal tension. Bill introduces, frames and advocates for this exercise by suggesting, “Let’s just see if the class is interested by this, and it seems that it might make it a more complete challenge for [our community of inquiry].” We all agree to participate, and Nadine and Sue are each allocated two other members of class to act as their voices in dialog. This has the dual-effect of immediately depersonalizing the issues and engaging all of us in the transformational task of moving beyond where two of our members, and therefore our group as a whole, have gotten stuck. Finally, as a result of Nadine’s second person paper, the email exchanges, and the confrontation and feedback exercise we do in class, Sue uses her second person research paper written during the following week as a forum to reflect on and inquire about her and our personal, interpersonal, and the group learning trajectory. (To give another impression of the degree of members’ commitments to these research practices, the paper was 15 single-spaced pages long, with 16 singled-spaced pages of transcript as an appendix.) Here are two pages of Sue’s paper (note that AI refers to Torbert’s *Action Inquiry* text (2004):

*Much of the content of this exercise was the giving and receiving of feedback among members in the group. In the tables on the next pages, I summarize the feedback that was*

exchanged during the session. I characterize the feedback as single, double, or triple-loop feedback. **Single-loop feedback** is information that tells me whether or not my last move advanced me toward the goal. (AI, p. 16) **Double-loop feedback** addresses a person's strategy, structure, or goals. (AI, p. 18-19) **Triple-loop feedback** highlights the present relationship between our effects in the outside world and our actions, our strategies, and our attention itself. (Ibid.)

I was struck by the richness of the feedback we gave each other, and I was generally impressed by the way people gave feedback during the session, which for the most part, I experienced as caring and skillful. (I say "for the most part" because I think both Nadine and I said things in the heat of the moment that could have been said more compassionately and with less charge.) I was also struck by the breadth of the feedback, and how each person was able to see something different, and important. I very much appreciated the diversity of voices around the table, because I got to see a lot more about how I was behaving and making sense of the situation than I would have if I'd been talking just with Nadine, or even with just one or two of you there. Each person brought something important to the discussion, and I am grateful for your participation.

I received five single-loop, seven double-loop, and two possibly triple-loop pieces of direct feedback from all six members of the group (Ed.s: we have not included these detailed tables). The feedback to me covered several main themes:

- The impact on Nadine of my evaluative comments and the way I presented my feedback, both in the emails that preceded the conversation and in the conversation itself
- Challenges to "own" my piece of the situation—it's not just Nadine's "incompetence" that's making me angry, it's something in me too!
- Challenges to see the good faith efforts that Nadine made to frame her paper as her own assumptions—which is inherent in a second-person paper—and which she invited people to test and discuss
- Invitations to look for the truth in what Nadine wrote—perhaps by considering that the motivations she attributed to me might be coming from my subconscious shadow side.

Nadine received four single-loop pieces of feedback, four that were double-loop, and two that could be interpreted as either single or double-loop feedback. Feedback to Nadine covered the following main themes:

- Challenges to take more responsibility for the impact of her paper on the people she is writing about who will be reading the paper
- Challenge to the appropriateness of the attitude "it's not a situation to me" in responding to someone who has been impacted by something Nadine wrote
- Invitation to view the alter-ego exercise as an opportunity to engage in mutual inquiry and learning, rather than trying to "make Sue feel better"
- Invitation to explore different ways of phrasing writing that address concerns or potential concerns of second-person paper readers

Overall, this mini-cosmos of reflection and refraction among members of our group points to the consequences and learning we experienced around the idea of "competent" feedback, and how a mutual commitment to gifting one another with skillful

feedback can generate true intimacy. A key developmental lesson to be gleaned from this series of communications, misperceptions, reactions and interactions is the idea and evidence that we can and do get more competent at giving significant feedback as we thrash and blunder incompetently through such feedback cycles first. We begin to see that sometimes, when we are sure the only competence issue is how to give the other the precise single-loop feedback he or she clearly needs, we gradually discover that it is we ourselves who receive some even more important double-loop feedback. The ability to transform through feedback that enables, not just single-loop, but also double- and triple-loop learning is dependent on the co-occurrence of a choice and a skill set to activate and digest that feedback. As Sue noted in the second person paper:

*“It is tricky to evaluate whether participants accepted and digested feedback and used it to transform themselves, test their own frames, and feel the limitations and self-contradictions inherent in their view of reality. These processes are internal ones, which may or may not be reflected in observable behavior. Moreover, they take time. To accept and digest feedback, and then transform oneself—especially in a brief encounter when emotions are running high—is an extremely challenging undertaking.”*

Overall, these two members of our class proved themselves to be willing and active, and eventually even competent, agents of private and public change as they (and we) struggled through the dance of their feedback loops. Indeed, Nadine later in the course delivered a piece of feedback with double- and triple-loop reverberations to the instructor, Bill, helping him to reframe a very significant (to him) relational dilemma he had been facing for a decade and to act differently than he could have imagined prior to the feedback from Nadine (in the end, he apologized to an old colleague whom he had previously imagined owed him an apology). Thus, Nadine not only moved herself (with the support and confrontation of others) from “draftee” to “volunteer” during the course, but also became a valued source of transformational feedback to other participants and even to the “sole institutional power-possessor” in the course. This third set of incidents in our action inquiry model represents another juncture where developmental learning was integrated within each I, across at least two You’s, amidst our We (the group) and our collective It (the ARM class), and even (through this chapter) across other Its (the classes you, our readers, teach differently because of reading this, and perhaps also new university/societal norms around how classes ought to work, to which this chapter may make a small contribution).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have detailed three sets of learning incidents from a PhD-level Action Research Methods course that demonstrate ongoing development toward a community of inquiry that encourages first-, second-, and third-person research and welcomes single-, double-, and triple-loop feedback, as community participants develop and integrate skills, capacities, and awarenesses as members, leaders, and researchers.

The first example of how we stumbled on an early learning moment regarding inclusion is enacted in a group and organizational context with themes of personal and membership commitment, in-group and out-group norms, as well as elements of coercive pressure, individual resistance, and a growing awareness of individual territories of

experience as well as group dynamics. Bob's invitation to explore norms of membership resulted in his own double-loop questioning of his original operative action-logic of "knowing better" than a co-member how to engage in a community of inquiry. As a result of this in-class confrontation and discussion, followed up by Bob's second-person research paper that further analyzes the set of interactions, a personal (certainly for Bob, and probably for several of us), interpersonal (certainly between Bob and Jim, and probably between and among others of us), and collective (certainly for our group as a whole) transformational double-loop learning occurred that enables all of us to re-evaluate our implicit and enacted concepts of inclusion and voluntary versus coerced participation in a community of inquiry.

The second example of a reflection about the role of institutionally-endowed power and control in our group shows the tension inherent in growing awareness of and movement beyond centralized, unilateral, already-legitimate sources of power toward more distributed, mutual and communally-creative sources of power. In the highlighted incident, unilateral control is enacted through Bill's preference for and influence over a "tight" seating configuration. Further evidence of Bill's power in our community of inquiry is presented in terms of his institutional role as professor-expert-evaluator, enacted through grading assessments, class duration requirements, and a pre-formulated mission statement for the course. Through the process of our independently- and jointly-authored exploration of whether and how an instructor might genuinely share control of the class as a whole and to what degree Bill might actually be exerting as much or more unilateral power than a typical professor, we engage in the practice of inquiry-in-action with him, thereby reducing the mythical "unopposable" power organizational subordinates can project on superiors. The class chose not to accept some aspects of this more mutually empowered offering. We did not change the grading structure or the mission for our group, nor did we challenge Bill's control (no one sat on the outskirts of the table where no piles of paper had been placed, and no one publically questioned the requirement of an additional hour together each week). On the other hand, however, our community of inquiry embraced and invoked increasingly mutual power and leadership over the course of the semester as we individually and collectively awakened to and participated in the "dance of power" in our group, manifest in more generative and collaborative development of class-to-class agendas, the influence of second-person research papers, and the choice of readings, discussion, and exercises for the last several class meetings. In these ways, we moved from a taken-for-granted, conventional unilateral, power and control tradition in classrooms toward a not-just-talked-about-but-actually-performed mutual power dynamic.

With the third example, we explore a double-loop feedback interaction that deals with the issue of between-member conflict and intimacy and results in strategic and paradigmatic changes by different members of the group. A key transformation in this third set of incidents is the movement from draftee to volunteer in the case of Nadine, whose struggle through feedback cycles with Sue results in further third-person research and a growing personal awareness of how practices in developmental action inquiry can transform her own personal, interpersonal, and group actions and experiences. This third incident echoes similar issues of required versus voluntary participation that arose in the first example between Bob and Jim, except that in this case Nadine and Sue, with the active support of the other participants, *both* acknowledge double-loop learnings about



the blind-spots in their action logics, and the instructor himself is offered a triple-loop learning opportunity. Another shared facet of this incident with the others we highlight is Bill's continued exercise of power, in this case by creating of the "angels" exercise. In this case, however, Bill's influence attempt is explicit and tests whether others consider the exercise useful. Since all of the participants agreed to participate in this experiment-in-inquiry and did so actively, Bill's authority in this case seems more collaborative and less coercive. (Put differently, any other member of our group might have made a similar suggestion for addressing the issue by this mid-point in the semester, and we likely would have decided in the same way whether to accept it.) Regardless, the balancing of different types of power, gradually moving toward greater dispersal of initiatives and greater mutuality and away from a single hierarchical source of power continues to play out in this example as it has in others preceding it. Finally, the experiences of conflict and feedback and increasing intimacy among the various participants in the group, as exemplified by this set of incidents between Nadine and Sue, highlights an essential quality of any community of inquiry – that all the members must develop increasingly strong and peer-like relationships that do not generate or accept dependency or co-dependency, and that, while respecting one another's independence, also support mutual transformation and inter-independence.

This attempt at generating a transformational community of action and inquiry was limited by the time and role constraints of the larger institutional context within which it was enacted, as well as by respect for the limited commitment to action inquiry that some of its members were willing to make. We certainly do not claim that the class became a full-fledged community of inquiry during its brief 100-day existence. Nevertheless, we hope that it illustrates how development to later individual and group action-logics can be generated in a classroom. Development, we are proposing and illustrating, is generated, not through talking about developmental theory, so much as through interweaving first-, second-, and third-person actions and inquiries, with increasing appreciation for sending and receiving single-, double-, and triple-loop feedback, and with increasing attentiveness to and inquiring dialogue about issues of inclusion, power, conflict and intimacy as these present themselves.

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