

People Powered Innovation for The Academy: The Best of Appreciative Inquiry, Design Thinking & Socio-Technical Systems Principles - Bernard J. Mohr

“You can’t force someone to innovate, nor can you tell someone to learn. Demanding creativity usually results in the opposite, and expecting opposing parties to agree on a solution rarely ends well.” Williamson & Engelberg, 2016

PROLOGUE

I apologize in that I am neither full-time faculty anywhere, nor have I held administrative/leadership positions such as department chair or dean, provost or president at any academic institution. And yet here I find myself – writing about how you might lead organizational innovation in what is surely one of today’s most complex and challenging environments. I can only share my learnings (based on some 45 years of working in this arena) combined with a deep valuing of the contributions the academy makes to society. With that in mind, I ask that you approach the following material with a curious mind, asking yourself always, “*What part of this makes sense to me and how might I use these ideas in my own world?*” If you find at least one good idea for use in your setting, then I will feel I have been successful. Of course if you want to engage me in dialogue about any of this, I greatly look forward to that. Together we can do what none of us can do alone.

INTRODUCTION: Quick definitions

In the context of post-secondary education, *innovation* refers to the actual *use-in-practice* of new and better ways to teach, learn, and conduct research and other related tasks or processes for the benefit of students, faculty, and administrators. *Change* can only be called *innovation* when the new ways are actually *used-in-practice* and deliver the intended benefit. Anything short of that is not an innovation – it is just an idea not yet transformed into practice.

This definition significantly shifts the focus beyond idea generation to idea execution. This is no small shift. There are huge implications - not just for the “what” of organizational innovation but for the “how” of the

innovation process. From initial conceptualization to thoughtful and meaningful stakeholder participation to the essential tasks involved in rapid iteration, Appreciative Inquiry, Design Thinking and Socio-Technical System principles are a good fit.

“Organizational Innovation” refers to innovation both in “*what*” we do and the “*way*” people are organized and assigned to do certain tasks. For example, changes in curriculum, teaching or evaluation methods, faculty performance assessments, administrator responsibilities and authorities, institutional strategy, decision sequences, collaboration, and planning processes would all be domains for possible organizational innovation. Changes in technology and facilities often accompany organizational innovation and sometimes they are the drivers of organizational innovation.

Not all organizational change is particularly innovative – in that change can be neutral, negative, or positive. Innovation by definition is about recombining existing resources in ways that are “better” – as seen by core stakeholders, in this case faculty, students, and administrators.

Appreciative Inquiry in this context is not an alternative to organizational innovation but rather an approach to it.

FOUR QUESTIONS

1. What are the defining features that underlie the People Powered Innovation Labs (PPI-L) process as it relates to organizational innovation and change?

a. *Organizational innovation is emergent. Fortunately, so are Appreciative Inquiry, Design Thinking and Socio-Tech.*

People Powered Innovation Labs (AI + STS + DT) are iterative. The phases of the PPI-L process (Initiate, Inquire, Imagine, Invigorate) were never meant to be linear. Rather they represent a philosophy of innovation in which we learn as we go and rethink and redo as needed. For example, in traditional research we emphasize the value of asking the same research questions of all our subjects, and to change the questions midstream would be seen as corrupting the data. PPI-L sees the world as fundamentally emergent; a continuous flow of conversations which are socially constructing our future. In this context, we would shift the early Inquiry questions as we become more clear on their ability to help us learn about (and in so doing co-construct) the world to which we aspire. When we dream in the PPI-L process *about* the kind of workplace we hope for, we often see the need for additional discovery and so we go back. When we develop the detail of the innovations which will bring our imaginations alive, we often find ourselves re-imagining...and so on. The essence of PPI-L is flexibility, and embracing emergence. PPI-L activities and processes have been developed to support those possibilities.

b. Relationships are essential and they are built in parallel with People Powered Innovation work.

Very few (if any) great social innovations are the work of a single person. The complexity of organizational innovation requires trust, collaboration, and a willingness to step into the unknown. This is what relationships give us. Few organizations cannot benefit from new and better relationships. But relationship building must occur during the work of organizational innovation. We do not have the time or resources for “relationship building activities” that are detached from the core work that needs to be done. It is in the “fire” of relationships emerging during appreciative innovation that new ideas and the energy to move them into daily practice are forged.

The multiple high participation modes of engagement for PPI-L (ranging from paired interviews to large group summits to positive change networks to innovation consortia) allow an unlimited number of people to move into new relationships where relational capital is developed. The polyphonic nature of the PPI-L approach to organizational innovation supports this completely. When many (ideally all) voices are engaged in discovering not only what the world is calling for us to become, but also our own deeply held hopes and aspirations, we become known to each other in completely different ways from the normal hub-bub of institutionalized politicized discourse. When we discover the hidden talents so many of us have, which

we hardly ever get to use, we realize the vastness of our resources for creating a better future.

Shared meaning, another key element in organizational innovation, is enabled by the dialogical nature of PPI-L. The co-construction of shared meaning in turn fuels our desire for and capacity to be in relationships with each other. Without shared meaning, coordination of effort becomes arduous. Without coordinated effort, organizational innovation falters and ebbs away.

c. Vision and transition plans are necessary but insufficient ingredients for organizational innovation.

Common wisdom suggests that for organizations to grow and evolve, compelling visions of a desired future and good plans for how to get from here to there are necessary. These are in fact two highly powerful ingredients, without which innovation becomes difficult. However, this perspective misses a core ingredient which an appreciative innovation process allows us to add. The basic human need to have some continuity in a sea of change is core to diffusing the bulk of resistance to organizational innovation.

The Inquiry phase of all PPI-L processes incorporates a continuity search. This is a search for those few values or practices that give life to the organization; that small set of core factors which are seen as integral to who we are. In the discovery work at a large pharmaceutical research institution, the core life-giving factor, that which if we didn't retain it would lead to our demise, was a commitment to good science. It was not the salaries, the dining facilities, the campus, or the state of the art facilities. It was the lack of pressure to fudge results; it was the readiness to entertain promising, albeit moonshot, research directions if well-reasoned. In short, the shared value of good science, when identified and elevated as the institution's most important thing to continue while everything else might change, was the single most critical intervention for reducing resistance to innovation. Widespread participation in the work of Inquiry and Imagining was a close second since people support what they themselves have created.

2. How can PPI-L be used to create organizational agility particularly at the meso level (divisional, institutional) within a higher education context?

All organizations are dependent on resources from and relationships with the “outside”. This means that shifts in the world outside require constant adjustments and sometimes even radical change by the university if it is to continue to flourish. The practical meaning of

“To innovate, we must skew the day in ways that will spur innovation. We call this emergent design (ED.) The emergent part happens at a few levels. Intentionally piecing-together the flow of the day is one way. Another is the emergence needed in the planned day, when the plan does not match the reality on the ground.”

Williamson & Engelberg, 2016

organizational agility in an educational context is then about how quickly, how effectively, and at what cost (economic and social) the institution can create innovation in meaningful areas such as research, curriculum, teaching/learning, student life, faculty engagement, administrative processes, and so on.

Such innovation (at the divisional and institutional levels) requires not just a strong relational base but also structures, systems, and practices that enable agility as well as a way of thinking about innovation that is congruent with the complexity of the situation. The intertwining of these elements calls for a process capable of developing all three “as we create the path forward by walking it together.”

The structural requirements of agility include having mechanisms for sensing shifts in the outside world that are distributed within the institution rather than being the domain only of senior administrators. Having conversational containers at the divisional level for sharing individual thinking about values to be pursued, assessment of opportunities to be seized, and prioritization of what the world is calling for are essential if the “whole” is to move forward with integrated but locally powered innovation strategies. Through its processes for “Inquiry and Imagining” PPI-L has the capacity for not just drawing individual thinking into an integrated picture of future possibility, but the design activities in PPI-L also allow the co-construction of new and better mechanisms/structures for sensing and responding to external events – a sort of “paving the road while we walk on it” approach.

In the *Invigorate* phase of PPI-L, the focus is not just on getting things implemented. The focus is on continued emergent designing in recognition that the complex interactions of stakeholders, tasks, processes, and external shifts both within and without our universities can confound our best laid plans. The PPI-L *Invigorate* phase proposes an implementation sequence of start small, review and adjust, grow bigger, review, incorporate new realities, modify, grow more and so on – a sort of “learn your way into the future” strategy. It is this dynamic way of implementing that tills the ground and waters the plants of organizational agility – by walking the talk of being flexible, of collaborating to move forward, of continually asking,

“What’s working well and why?”, “What new realities and possibilities are emerging?”, “What new strengths, assets, and capacities are we uncovering?” and, “Where do we want to go now?”

3. What conditions are critical to building capacity for a sustainable culture of innovation?

With its work of *Inquiry*, the PPI-L process supports the creation of greater *understanding* of the world we are in; the work on a dream of the future supports the creation of a shared *vision* of our preferred future; the work of design supports the development of clarity about what we will do to move forward; and finally the work of *Invigorate* teaches us about *emergence and agility* as we build our capacity for this through learning by doing.

Underpinning all of this is a movement by senior leaders from seeing themselves as managers to seeing themselves as designers – not designers of the future per se, but rather designers of the structures and systems and practices that enable the voices of all to participate in co-creating positive VUCA (vision, understanding, clarity and action) around innovations that are needed. In that sense, they are designers of an agile institution capable of continuous innovation that is suitably paced, effective, and occurs at minimal economic and social cost.

People Powered Innovation Labs provide many of the tools and ideas to bring these concepts to life.

4. What 3 leadership strategies have you found to be the most powerful in inspiring innovation and change (e.g., the art of storytelling), and why?

Strategy #1: Building on the best of who we are and what we care about.

Whether we describe it as a continuity search or the articulation of shared values, starting with an inquiry into and a dialogue on “What do we share in common, what do we value, and what do we want to preserve?” is essential in cultures where there is great passion about the work. The academy is such a culture.

Strategy #2: Radical inclusion.

Designing and using innovative forums and processes for “conversations of the whole” is not just one way, it is the only way that we can develop the agility needed to thrive in today’s shifting sands. None of us has the knowledge, wisdom, energy, or resources that all of us have collectively. The challenge is accessing the “whole” in ways that are economical, productive, and take our collective thinking and doing beyond the normal. Fortunately, the past 30 years has seen an explosion of tools and processes to help us with this. PPI-L uses the Appreciative Innovation Summit, a flexible, scalable process that can engage hundreds to thousands of participants in co-creating meaningful change.

Strategy #3: Humble listening.

We all have opinions, views, ideas, experience, wisdom – mixed with passion, frustration, hope, despair, and willingness to try once more. All of these must be accessed, acknowledged, and respected. The key to this is humble listening.

Humble listening invites the “other” to be center stage. It communicates to the other that we see the possibility of multiple realities and that their reality is also true. It does not require us to give up our own reality but rather to accept that, with few (if any) exceptions, almost all that we believe to be true, and good, is the result of many conversations – not an external, objective “truth-giving machine”. With this perspective, we shift from telling and selling to asking and listening – not as an alternative to advocacy, but as a respite from it.

Humble listening requires no special facilities or executive approvals. Only a willingness to engage the other from the stance of “I” and “thou”, rather than “I and “it” (see epilogue).

EPILOGUE:

Martin Buber, an Austrian theologian and philosopher is the originator of the view that when we connect with others as people to be understood as the same as us, rather than as objects to be manipulated, our universe of possibilities expands exponentially.

As the British author M. M. Owen (2018) so eloquently writes:

The basic argument of *I and Thou* goes like this:
human existence is fundamentally interpersonal.
Human beings are not isolated, free-floating objects,

but subjects existing in perpetual, multiple, shifting relationships with other people, the world, and ultimately God. Life is defined by these myriad interactions – by the push and pull of intersubjectivity.

Whether we find value in the ideas of social constructionism (a core underpinning of PPI-L) or we find more accessible the works of philosophers such as Buber, the notion is that deeply human relationships are the vortex of possibility. Our conversations, our inquiries, and our advocacies are the tools we all have at our disposal to create such relationships.

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