The essential transformation: How Master's students make sense and learn through transformative change

James Conklin, Terry Kyle and Colin Robertson

Abstract

This paper considers how the Human Systems Intervention Master's program at Concordia University in Montreal encourages and manages a transformation in the way students think about and act in the social world. The paper explains the transformation in terms of a shift from a positivist/rational to a constructivist/narrative view of social phenomena, and how specific elements of the curriculum provoke the shift toward a more reflexive and participative way of working. The paper also discusses the disconfirmation and uncertainty that can accompany the transformation, describes the structures and processes used to construct a container that provides psychological safety and emotional support for students, and considers ways in which the program might be improved.

Keywords: experiential learning, transformation, human systems intervention, holding environment, dialogue

Introduction

This paper focuses on how the Human Systems Intervention (HSI) Master's program at Concordia University in Montreal transforms the way students think about and act in the social world (Mezirow,

1990, 2000). For many students, this transformation involves a shift from a positivist to a constructivist view of social phenomena (Fisher, 1978, 1984; Schön, 1983). The shift can be seen as an interruption of existing and relatively stable sensemaking patterns, and, largely through the use of self-directed learning techniques and group exercises using self-managing teams, the development of new sensemaking patterns (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick, 1995). The paper discusses the uncertainty that accompanies the transformation (Mackeracher, 2004; Taylor, 1986), and reviews the structures and processes used to construct a container (Isaacs, 1999; Jaques, 1955; Smith & Berg, 1997) or holding environment (Kahn, 2001, 2005) that provides support for students.

Many HSI students expect to learn the "answers" to vexing organizational questions. They have become disillusioned with the command-and-control organizations in which they work, where meanings and solutions are imposed by upper management upon middle managers and employees. These students believe that hierarchical power structures result in sluggish organizational performance, and they want to learn how to introduce more democratic approaches.

New HSI students often fail to appreciate that the experiential nature of the curriculum has pedagogical and epistemological implications. For HSI, change in human systems has less to do with imposing a new management idea upon a passive workforce, and more to do with mobilizing members of a social system around a shared need for collective action. Rather than teaching students how to impose change upon clients, HSI invites students to learn how to unleash the power of participation and dialogue within complex systems.

In fact, participation and dialogue form an important part of the HSI curriculum. The curriculum is highly experiential, and calls for ongoing sensemaking conversations involving students and faculty. Students are encouraged to talk about how events in the cohort impact them intellectually and emotionally, and to inquire together into the reasons for their responses. This often leads to discussions

of underlying assumptions and habits of mind, systemic patterns within the social environment, and issues of equity and power, and gives rise to the realization that a social milieu is characterized by multiple narratives and interpretations.

The experience of transformational change can be disorienting. For the HSI program to succeed, the curriculum must provoke the shift to a new way of thinking about and acting in the social world, and it must support students during this transformation. This paper suggests how these two goals are achieved. The three authors are all graduates of the program. One (James Conklin) is now a member of the full-time faculty team that delivers the program; the others (Terry Kyle and Colin Robertson) are working as consultants to public and private sector clients. At the suggestion of the anonymous reviewers of the paper's first draft, one of us conducted semi-structured interviews with five alumni who recently graduated from the program. By drawing on our own experience of the program, on the literature that constitutes its theoretical foundation, and on these student experiences, we explore two questions. First, how do HSI students experience the indeterminacy that accompanies the transformation towards a constructivist perspective on social change that lies at the heart of the HSI program? Second, how do the curriculum and teaching practices offered by faculty support students as they make their way through this indeterminacy?

The HSI Master's Program at Concordia University

The HSI Master's Program develops expertise in promoting planned change in human systems (groups, organizations, and communities), and is recognized as an example of a paradigm shift in management education toward a pedagogy of engagement (Raelin, 2007; Taylor et al., 2002). To enter the program, students must have an undergraduate degree and at least two years of work experience. The program attracts organizational leaders, consultants, facilitators, organization development specialists, and others who are interested in social change. Some students are in the early stages of

their career, some are mid-career, and some are in the final phases of their careers. The program uses a cohort model, where all students take the same set of courses and work together as an integrated learning community. The cohort assembles once a month, and also gathers for week-long intensives at an off-site location at the start of the first and second years.

The HSI curriculum is based on a constructivist view of learning that balances experience, reflection, analysis, and planning (Kolb, 1985; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Mumford, 1997). The program includes experiential components in which students participate in laboratory simulations or situate their learning in their own workplaces and lives. Learning is seen as both individual and social (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mackeracher, 2004; Vince, 1998; Weick, 1995). Activities and assignments are sometimes carried out by individuals and sometimes by groups, and students and faculty often participate in learning conversations that integrate experience with research and theory. Students are encouraged to view the cohort as a natural laboratory in which they can develop awareness of how a human collective experiences impulses toward stability and change (Bateson 1979; Brown and Duguid 2000; Taylor and van Every 2000; Weick 2009), and how these impulses might be observed in the unfolding conversations within a workplace.

The curriculum is based on the belief that learning and development require social interaction. As Vygotsky argued, "…the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 19). Although we might reflect alone on the meaning of our experiences, the trigger for learning is our participation in a social world. However, for HSI learners social experience often involves an encounter with unfamiliar situations. It is unreasonable to expect HSI students to assume the role of change agent and venture into uncertain social encounters without appropriate support, and thus the curriculum also makes use of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and the associated concept of scaffolding (Star & McDonald, 2007;

Mosca et al., 2011; Wood et al., 1976). Faculty and the curriculum provide the support that students need to begin to safely explore new social experiences (Bruner, 1982).

Recent theorizing and research in management learning has included a growing emphasis on the importance of developing a capacity for reflective practice (Gray, 2007; Jordan et al., 2009; Keavers & Treleaven, 2011; Vince, 2002). To gain awareness of underlying assumptions and organizational constraints, and to uncover potentially oppressive structures and power dynamics, practitioners spend time sharing perspectives, evaluating results, explaining rationales, and considering options. The HSI curriculum places considerable emphasis on the use of reflective dialogue, both as a technique to reveal assumptions that put limits on thinking and action, and as a way of creating and sustaining the holding environment needed to support students through periods of disconfirmation and change.

The curriculum is also informed by the action modalities: action research, action learning and action science (Argyris et al., 1985; Pedler, 1997; Raelin, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Stringer, 1999). Indeed, the curriculum as a whole might be seen as an implementation of Revans's basic tenet: that learning results when programmed knowledge (knowledge that is accessed through textbooks and lectures) is combined through action with questioning insight (Revans, 1998). Students are formed into self-managing learning groups that are given a task to perform (often involving library work, and occasionally calling for primary data collection, intervention planning, or exploring a client relationship), and that are also encouraged to support and contribute to each other's learning. Through classroom exercises and simulations, group assignments, and supervised consulting experiences, students integrate social science theory with their ongoing experiences of organizational life, make sense of these experiences through discussion with peers and faculty, and develop the ability to help clients to solve problems as well as to develop an enhanced problem-solving capacity.

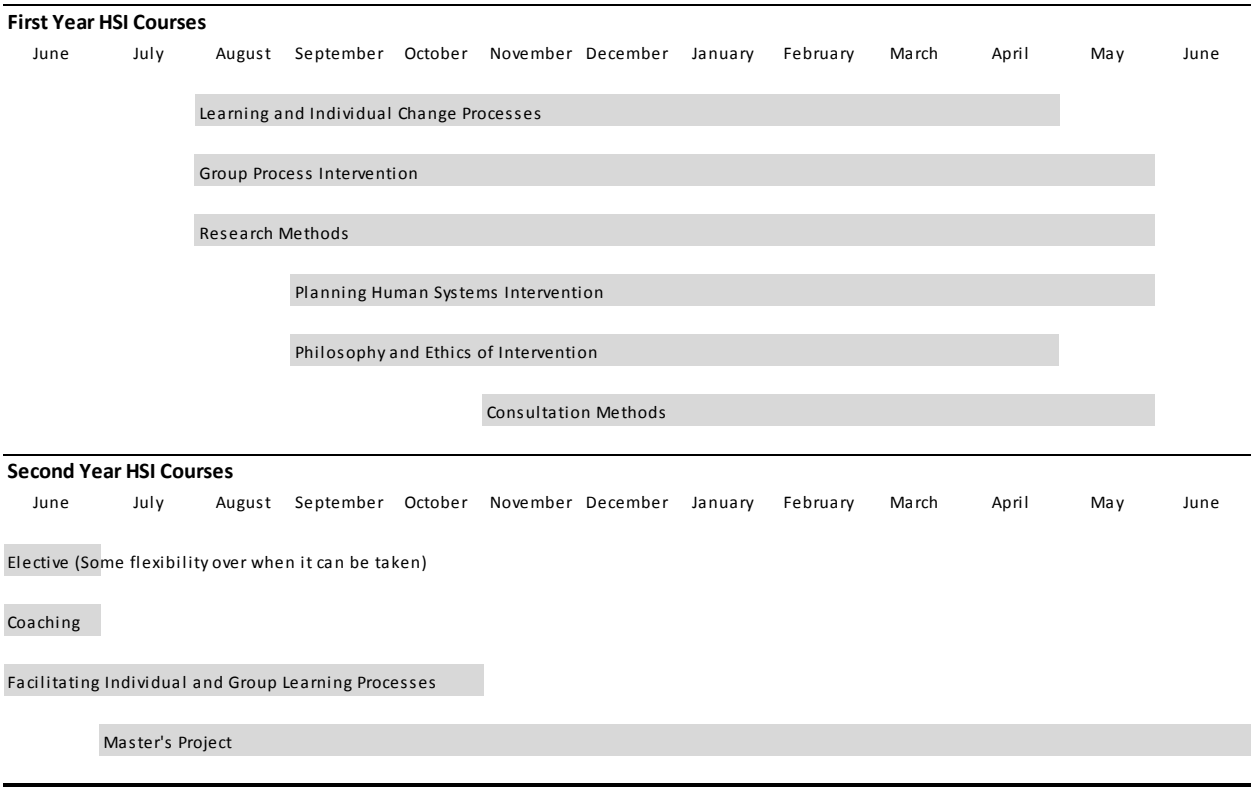
Before beginning the program, students complete a compulsory human relations laboratory that is held in May at an auberge in eastern Quebec. Originally this laboratory took the form of a week-long Training Group (T-Group), but in recent years it was redesigned to promote enhanced understanding of interpersonal communication and group dynamics. After successfully completing this prerequisite, students take six courses (for eighteen credits) during first year, and four courses (for 27 credits), including a thesis-equivalent graduating project, during second year. Table I summarizes the courses, and Figure 1 illustrates their flow.

TABLE I: PURPOSE AND FOCUS OF COURSES IN THE HSI MASTERS PROGRAM

Course	Purpose and Description
Year One	
Learning and Individual Change Processes	• Acquaints students with the research and theory of learning and change, with emphasis on a normative re-educative approach. • Includes a self-designed project that allows students to initiate change related to their own strengths and challenges as learners.
Group Process Intervention (Laboratory course)	• Increases understanding of group dynamics, leadership, and power relations, and develops capacity to intervene in groups. • Includes an intensive six-day laboratory based on the Bridger working conference model.
Research Methods	• Familiarizes students with applied qualitative and quantitative research methods, including a component on participative action research. • Involves individual and group assignments focusing on research design, literature reviews, ethnographic techniques, surveys, and interviews.
Planning Human Systems Intervention	• Promotes an understanding of the design and implementation of interventions based on the concepts of single- and double-loop learning. • Involves readings, discussions, and experiences to develop personal and collaborative skills, and to learn how to promote client autonomy.
Philosophy and Ethics of Intervention	• Increases understanding of philosophical perspectives and ethical issues in the practice of intervening in human systems. • Involves surfacing assumptions, values and beliefs that underlie actions, and competency in handling ethical dilemmas that arise in practice.
Consultation Methods (Practicum course)	• Increases understanding of the consulting process and the iterative dynamics of a consulting relationship. • Students form teams and carry out their first consulting practicum.
Year Two	
One Elective	• Students take one elective at the start of the second year: a special topics seminar (e.g. on complex adaptive systems theory), an independent study, or a week-long intensive seminar on open systems theory.
Coaching Interventions	• Develops understanding of theories and methods of coaching related to

Course	Purpose and Description
and Processes	the functioning of groups, organizations and communities.
Facilitating Individual and Group Learning Processes (Laboratory course)	• Practical experience in the design, planning, and implementation of learning interventions. • Involves an intensive laboratory experience, including a two-day intervention in a client system designed and delivered by the cohort as a whole.
Master's Project (Thesis-Equivalent Practicum)	• Calls for students to demonstrate ability to design and implement an intervention to bring about change in a human system. • Students find a client and carry out an intervention, supported by a field supervisor (an HSI alumnus) and an academic supervisor.

FIGURE I: FLOW OF COURSES IN THE HSI MASTERS PROGRAM



The program begins with two courses that encourage students to become more aware of their own preferences, strengths and challenges as learners and change agents, and to gain experience in observing and analyzing system dynamics. Through these courses— Learning and Individual Change Processes and Group Process Intervention—students inquire into themselves (their assumptions, values, habits, skills, and patterns of behaviour) and human collectives (the interaction patterns that tend to

arise in complex systems, and the relationship between these patterns and such things as power, external pressures, leadership practices, and interpersonal relationships). In effect, the two initial courses outline the challenges facing students—challenges related to their capacity to function as agents of change in complex, unpredictable systems, and related to the knowledge and skills needed to observe, analyze, and act with intentionality in social situations.

The remaining first year courses deal with research methods, ethical pitfalls and strategies, the role of planning and emergence in interventions, and ways of creating and sustaining effective relationships with client systems. Students also gain practical experience in working with clients from a process consulting stance (Block, 1999; Schein, 1999). In the second year students further hone these abilities by acquiring skills in coaching and system diagnosis, and by carrying out two significant practicum projects—one with the entire cohort functioning as a consulting team, and the other as individual consultants working directly with a client system on a real-world problem.

Throughout the program there is an ongoing emphasis on learning-in-relationship. Students are regularly invited (and are occasionally required) to meet with faculty to discuss their progress and challenges, as a way of ensuring that the student is coping with the program's intellectual and emotional demands. More significantly, students have group experiences in every course, and the groups that are formed often function as peer learning environments. These groups are generally given a task to perform related to the curriculum, and group members are also asked to observe and learn from their own group process. Moreover, students are encouraged to share their learning goals and challenges with their peers, to provide feedback and support to each other, and to work together to understand the opportunities and pitfalls associated with intervening in human systems. The final course in the program involves a consulting engagement with a client, where students are paired with an experienced field supervisor and coach and who usually interacts with the student through weekly meetings.

The cohort structure serves a dual purpose. First, the cohort functions as a human laboratory in which students may observe and live through the phases typical of group development (Bion, 1962; Gibb, 1978; Lacoursiere, 1980; Reilly & Mcbrearty, 2010; Schutz, 1984), as well as observe and reflect on patterns of interaction that emerge within the cohort that promote or hinder group effectiveness. Second, the cohort is encouraged to develop itself as a learning community (Senge, 1990), so that students have a direct experience of interventions that promote or hinder social learning.

Faculty recognize that transformative learning involves a period of disconfirmation, and that care and support must be an integral part of the curriculum. Recent graduates describe this experience in a variety of ways:

> "I felt that a lot of the things I believed about myself as positive were put into question and some of my potential that I did not know I had was revealed. I felt I was both stripped of self-esteem and given self-esteem."

> "I experienced a pretty profound internal transformation in the way I thought about myself in the world and it came because I simultaneously saw this thing as a crisis, destruction, and as a new thing being built at the same time. I learned to see people and the world in a different way and how I related to them."

To support students through this difficulty, professors play a variety of roles. When classes are in session, faculty diagnose the current condition of the cohort, and tailor presentations and activities to student needs. Some activities are intended to confront students with the pressures that can characterize organizational life during times of change. At times, faculty members take on the role of a process consultant who is working with the cohort, helping them to explore their experiences and devise new and more effective ways of working together. Not surprisingly, the learning that occurs in this environment can be uncomfortable. Consequently, professors devise ways of using the HSI classroom as a container for difficult emotions (Isaacs, 1999; Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960), and as a transitional object (Amado, 2001) that supports students through their learning.

Of course, a perennial challenge faced by faculty is the need to find a balance between teaching (acting as an expert who is transferring knowledge to passive recipients) and facilitating (acting as a learning partner whose primary goal is to create an environment where learning can occur). This is especially acute in the case of the self-directed learning teams that are a prominent feature of the program. How can faculty be sure that members of these self-managing teams feel empowered to learn rather than abandoned to dysfunction?

This balance is sought with each cohort and in each course by each professor, and it would be unrealistic to assume that every learning team comes to represent an optimal learning environment. Nonetheless, faculty recognize this as a major responsibility, and seek the balance through structural and curriculum elements as well as through their own teaching practice. For example, students are encouraged to read three texts before beginning their first course (Brazzel & Jones, 2006; French & Bell, 2005; Kleiner, 2008), and in the first few months of the program they are acquainted (through readings and lectures) with theory and research concerning group development, group dynamics, and social learning (for example: Bion, 1962; Gibb, 1978; Kolb, 1985; Lacoursiere, 1980; Mezirow, 1990, 2000; Raelin, 2008; Schutz, 1984; Taylor, 1986). They are also introduced to reflective dialogue in cohort forums with four faculty members (two professors and two interns), where they practice the art of "thinking together" (Isaacs, 1999), observe the behavior modeled by faculty, and participate in conversations about the learning capacity of the cohort. Finally, they are formed into small groups that tackle problems related to social experience in organizations, and with their peers (and with regular check-ins from faculty during the initial sessions) experiment with the unfamiliar stance of being both a participant in a task group and an observer and diagnostician of group processes.

Provoking the Transformation

The HSI curriculum uses a number of techniques to encourage a transformation in the way that students view and engage with the social world. In addition to lectures and reading assignments, the program includes methods that allow students to reevaluate their own social identity, the ways in which they interact with others in social situations, and what it means to introduce change into a social milieu.

For example, the course called Learning and Individual Change Processes focuses on learning at the individual level. Through readings, lectures, and discussions, learning is seen as an ongoing process that occurs as people interact in various social environments. Students consider the ways in which their own abilities to learn could help or hinder them as they try to design and implement changes in client systems. The course encourages students to identify their current learning challenges and strengths, and then develop a self-designed project intended to strengthen their capacity to reflect, learn, adapt, and take purposeful action.

The course encourages students to consider specific situations they have experienced within the cohort. They are asked to identify moments when they were blocked or successful in their effort to learn, and to consider these moments as part of a longer learning process. They are invited to deepen their understanding of their own learning strengths and challenges by analyzing these moments with a specific learning theory, such as Taylor's learning cycle model (1986) or transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1990, 2000). They are then asked to consider how these strengths and challenges have been present at various times in their lives, and what impact they are likely to have on the student's practice as a human systems intervener.

For example, one student may reflect on this assignment and realize that she is intimidated during periods of conflict. When part of a group in which an argument erupts, the student feels anxious and disengages from the group, even though the student possesses information or opinions that could help

to resolve the conflict. Upon reflection, the student may realize that she has lost numerous opportunities to exert influence during periods of intense competition. This student may decide to develop a personal learning project that allows her to become more comfortable and active during conflict, and she may inquire into the reasons why these types of interactions tend to drain her of energy and effectiveness.

Similarly, another student may notice that he has a tendency to support the aspirations of colleagues, and that he sometimes fails to put sufficient effort into his own priorities. When reflecting on this tendency, the student may realize that he has inadvertently come to see his own worth in terms of his contribution to the success of others. While this has won him praise and gratitude in the past, it has also meant that he has failed to achieve the level of personal success that he desires. This student may design a learning project that focuses on gaining clarity on personal priorities and goals, and initiating a plan aimed at achieving those goals, and that also includes an inquiry into the roots of his self-defeating system of behaviour.

The self-designed learning project encourages students to appreciate their strengths and examine their weaknesses. It encourages them to surface the assumptions, habits, and preferences that explain the way that they think about the social world and the way they interact with others. It invites them to unearth instances of incongruence, where their actions are at odds with their intentions. The project allows them to engage in single-loop learning that focuses on immediate issues (e.g. a capacity to engage effectively in competitive interactions), double-loop learning that helps them to gain clarity on their underlying assumptions and values, and triple-loop learning that allows them to understand the overall contexts for their learning processes (Argyris, 1990, 1993; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Raelin, 2008). Students use the course as a vehicle for deconstructing their current public persona, re-examining their long-term goals and current strengths and weaknesses, and experimenting with new behaviours and attitudes. Although this can be exhilarating, it also provokes discomfort in many students.

A second course (Group Process Intervention) includes a week-long laboratory based on Bridger's double-task working conference (Bridger, 2001; Powles, 2008; Rance, 2003). Here the cohort is divided into self-managing groups. The groups are given broad instructions on the development of group deliverables, and are told that at the end of the week they must integrate these deliverables into a single cohort product. In addition, students are expected to write a paper in which they integrate their experiences and observations during the week with their readings of systems and group development theory.

The working conference allows students to learn about group development processes (by participating in a small task group) and about broader system dynamics (by placing the task group within the context of a larger system, including other task groups, a management team made up of faculty, and small consulting groups made up of students drawn from the different task groups, and by creating activities that require interaction among these system components) (Spero, 2003). Before the start of the conference, students are given an exercise inviting them to reflect on issues of concern in their workplaces. In their small groups they discuss these issues, and extract principles and conclusions from their varied experiences of organizational life; at the same time, they try out a variety of roles, and obtain feedback from others about whether their intentions are clear and their actions effective. The conference forms a transitional space (Amado, 2001) where participants explore complexity and uncertainty, gain insight into the way authority and power impact group performance, and learn about managing their thoughts, feelings, and actions when interacting with others.

The conference involves a primary and a secondary task. The primary task calls for the cohort to produce two documents summarizing their discussions. The secondary task requires that students regularly suspend business on the primary task, and reflect together on their group process. Participants thus spend some of their time discussing their experiences of working in groups in organizational environments, and part of their time discussing their experience of being part of this

group. The result, for most students, is an opportunity to link theory and past experience with a new experience as it unfolds.

The week often has a profound effect on students, and leads to feelings of confusion about themselves and the actions unfolding around them. Students are surprised at how they conduct themselves during the week, and are sometimes discomfited by feedback they receive from peers. As one person who participated in a double-task conference in England has written, "You go through a period of 'not knowing' or maybe not being able to make sense of what you are feeling or how you should react to certain situations" (Powles, 2008, p. 189).

Experiences of Uncertainty and Disconfirmation

Anxiety often accompanies difficult learning (Taylor, 1986; Vince, 1998, 2009), and the elements of the HSI curriculum described above result in experiences of uncertainty among many students:

> "The first year was all about becoming less and less grounded or more and more confused as to how the courses were relating to developing intervention skills."
>
> "The cohort was always shifting, everything is shifting, and so, as soon as you understand something it is kind of too late. And sometimes you don't understand until after the fact. So we were meeting every month, and maybe before that last weekend you figure something out and then you come back a month later and the cohort is not the same anymore or other people think they have it figured out too but their diagnosis is completely different from what you thought was going on. …I guess the long and short of it is that it is a moving target and every time you think you 'have it' the 'it' has moved!"
>
> "It is like these peaks and valleys on multiple levels in terms of self-confidence and self-efficacy, belief in self. From a metaphorical stance in the valley you see nothing, on the peak everything seems clear. Sometimes when you are in the cohort you have the clear sense of self and sometimes you are in the valley and you see insurmountable peaks and you wonder, who am I, where am I suppose to move to, what is the next step?"

The three authors of this paper are graduates of the program, and suggest that this experience of disconfirmation has some characteristic features. First, although the sense of disconfirmation results from the student's encounter with the curriculum, it is experienced through interactions with other

cohort members. This is similar to a common organizational phenomenon, where structural barriers introduce paradoxes and tensions into organizational life that are expressed in the social system as interpersonal conflict, disengagement, and so on (Emery, 2010). The program's structure ensures that each student has ample opportunity to learn directly when receiving feedback from or when interacting with peers. For example, one student may experience an unsettling sense of disconfirmation when a powerful member of the cohort does not like and accept her as she sees herself. Another student might realize that a member of his cohort does not see him as the benevolent leader he believes himself to be, but instead considers him a bully.

Second, in the program's initial weeks it is common for students to cling tenaciously to a belief that their judgments are "right" and the judgments of many others are "wrong." Despite the explicitly constructivist elements of the lectures and readings, many students are convinced that they inhabit an objectified social world of which they themselves are the most reliable interpreter. Further, they believe their actions are based on a desire to do their best not only for themselves but also for the cohort. In other words, they find themselves re-enacting the same well-intentioned but ill-conceived behaviours that led them to enroll in the program in the first place—they are eager to impose their interpretation onto their skeptical classmates. It is as though they are living through a period of confirmation bias in which they choose to hear and see only those things that suit them—in the group, in an adversary and in themselves. However, this attempt to impose their sense of "rightness" cannot be sustained. The learning teams composed of peers, the frequent debriefings and the numerous occasions for giving and receiving feedback means that the complex pattern of attitudes, assumptions, and interactions is, to a considerable extent, visible for all to see.

Disconfirmation may come when a student realizes that he has unwittingly caused emotional pain, or when a student discovers that she is not, and can never be, liked by all members of the cohort. If you

have always seen yourself as benevolent, or as universally appreciated, what happens when a group of peers says unequivocally that this is not so? For many students, it is the beginning of change.

During the program's first year many students find that two specific elements of the curriculum generate uncertainty within the cohort: the "big circle" and the Knowledge Management Teams. The big circle is a constant of the HSI program. Cohort members sit in a circle of chairs, typically with professors acting as facilitators, to discuss and make sense of the group experience. It is an opportunity to "discuss the undiscussable" (Argyris, 1980), and thus to gain an appreciation for the way in which individual assumptions, inferences, decisions, and actions aggregate into group-level phenomena. Students develop an enhanced appreciation for the importance of setting aside their fears to inquire into the interpretations and emotions of others, and some find that their interpersonal competencies are significantly strengthened. The path to these insights, however, requires that students overcome the caution that they have learned in their workplaces, and thus the big circle gives rise to anxiety. Interestingly, however, the big circle simultaneously plays a supportive role (which we discuss later), and thus these group discussions also provide structure for students as they experiment with risky conversations.

A second curriculum element that often provokes disconfirmation is the Knowledge Management Team (KMT) exercise that forms part of the course on Learning and Individual Change Processes. This exercise (which begins during the first semester of the first year) divides the cohort into self-managed teams, each of which is given an assignment with a dual focus. Students are expected to assemble and share knowledge that will help them to work effectively as human system interveners, and they are also asked to observe their own group process and to work together on a collaborative paper due at the end of the term.

Halfway through this exercise, some groups are in dysfunctional crisis. Teammates are angry at each other for their varying levels of performance and commitment. As the assignment nears completion, students retrospectively note that the disconfirmation allowed for a deep integration of theory with personal experience. For many students, the experience leads them to a new way of thinking about change in human systems. They realize that a human system is not a unitary, objective entity that can be changed in the same way that one might renovate a basement. Instead, a human system is an evolving, adapting amalgam that is always both stable and unstable, both adaptive and resistant, and that one cannot be an effective intervener unless one becomes adept at operating on two levels simultaneously—on a personal level, with all of the heat of human emotion and political wrangling, and on a systemic level where the deeper patterns of stabilization, adaptation, and sensemaking unfold.

Supporting Students Through the Transformation

Overall, one might see the student's experience as involving what Taylor (1986) has termed "the red zone" of transformational learning. Students can be confused about their own social identity (their assumptions, expertise, and cherished roles) and about the social reality that is unfolding around them. Ultimately, most students report experiencing a profound sense of re-integration, and state that the learning they experienced through the program is significant. However, the route that leads to this new-found sense of insight and commitment passes through Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, where students encounter feelings of discomfort and uncertainty (Bruner, 1982; Vygotsky, 1962).

As a result, faculty must create and maintain a learning space or a container that holds the anxiety of students and allows the learning to move forward. As Kolb and Kolb (2005) explain, "To learn requires facing and embracing differences; whether they be differences between skilled expert performance and one's novice status, differences between deeply held ideas and beliefs and new ideas, or differences in

the life experience and values of others that can lead to understanding them" (p. 207). The learning space must encourage the expression of potentially embarrassing or troubling differences, while simultaneously supporting the students as they experiment with new behaviours.

At the same time, however, the HSI curriculum emphasizes the importance of allowing the learner to assume responsibility for his/her own learning. This creates a dilemma for faculty. As Mackeracher writes, "…simply placing adult learners in a context with few constraints and telling them to be self-directed is an inadequate (and some would say unethical and incompetent) way to facilitate the development of self-directedness" (2004, p. 48). How, then, can faculty provide competent and ethical support to students while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of the program?

In effect, faculty and the curriculum attempt to foster learning conversations that provide a container for the intensity of the student experience, that provide the support needed for students to navigate through the discomfort of transformational change, and that release the excitement and energy that accompanies breakthrough learning (Isaacs, 1999). Edmondson has pointed out that psychological safety (conceptualized as a blend of mutual trust, respect, and care) is necessary if people are to learn together by taking interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999), and that an effective learning environment offers a supportive structure that does not inhibit learner creativity (Edmondson, 2002). Kahn (2001, 2004) has argued that organizations that provide care to clients (and he includes educators and educational institutions in this category) must create a "holding environment" for clients and employees. He writes, "The premise here is that adults who experience strong emotions often need settings in which to safely express and interpret their experiences, that is, to temporarily regress to intentionally nurturing environments" (Kahn, 2001, p. 263). The holding environment is a temporary social form (a relationship or group) where collective interpretation or sensemaking can occur, and that is particularly useful when strong emotions are experienced.

Much of the learning in HSI occurs through sensemaking conversations. Learning involves a process of collective inquiry and sharing of views that allows for the construction of "usable knowledge" (Argyris et al., 1985) or "practical theories" (Cunliffe, 2002). These conversations bring to light the various polarities, problems, worries and interpretations that are shifting through the cohort. When a conversation of this sort is underway, participants have an opportunity to also inquire into the assumptions that are implicit in the views that are being expressed, and in some instances this can open the door to fundamental change—to double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) or what Cunliffe (2002, 2004) refers to as "reflexive dialogue." Conversation, then, plays a dual role in HSI: as a container for difficult emotion, and as a vehicle for transformational learning.

For example, a holding environment is constructed through the big circle discussions that we described earlier. The big circle creates dialogic space for cohort members to discuss their experience, raise concerns, and explore interpretations of the individual and collective transformation that is underway. Faculty initiate these discussions at the start of the program and participate in a facilitative role. Throughout first year, one evening each month is devoted to discussions of the cohort's unfolding experience, and to student-designed interventions to bolster the capacity of the learning community.

The holding environment is also constructed through the unique role played by the professor responsible for the course on Learning and Individual Change Processes. This professor assists each student to design a self-directed learning project to strengthen the students' awareness of their attitudes and behaviours, and to foster their ability to learn and adapt in difficult social situations. The professor plays a coaching role for students as they implement their project, and ensures that each student puts in place a framework of supportive relationships with cohort members who will provide both encouragement and feedback.

A third way in which this holding environment is created and sustained is through the Consultation Methods course which begins midway through the first year. This course allows students to conduct their first off-campus intervention into a human system. Over a six month period, students organize themselves into consulting teams, find a client, and design and implement an intervention. Most students find a process consulting stance to be unusual and initially uncomfortable, and often feel self-conscious and anxious as they begin this course. One student in a recent cohort remarked that in much professional training the student has an opportunity to observe the actions of a skilled practitioner. Without having ever seen examples of competent consulting practice, students are without models.

To help allay this anxiety, the professor for this course interacts with the cohort in a way that mirrors the interactions typical of a process consultant working with a team in an organizational setting (Block, 1999; Schein, 1999). The professor observes the students organizing themselves into teams, and sees how they work together on the first set of in-class exercises. The professor may then organize role playing exercises based on typical consultant-client interactions (the initial contracting meeting, the diagnostic process, or a client feedback session). Students observe and comment on the actions of the professor-as-consultant, and on their peers' behaviours during role playing exercises, and have a chance to try out and gain basic competence in the kinds of interactions that typically occur during student projects. When the student teams begin their projects, the professor remains available to them for meetings and conference calls, providing support as the client relationship unfolds. The professor also invites HSI alumni who are now practicing consultants into the classroom to help the students to troubleshoot specific situations that have arisen in their projects.

Alumni often emphasize the power and depth of their learning:

> "I felt a tremendous growth of knowledge both in terms of individual and group dynamics and how they help and hinder group effectiveness. I had growth in my understanding of my strengths and shortcomings in terms of my own being and then being part of a group."

> "It was sustainable, I have used some of the changes to inform the person I am now and the way I practice…. In a million ways it shaped my practice – the importance of engaging people in a process and the sensitivity to that is important for sustainable change."

Alumni also acknowledge the support that they experienced while contending with the uncertainty that is part of this program:

> "The support was in the feedback in assignments and through interactions and conversations with the professors, that was where I felt their support. They helped me understand where I was in the process. For instance, in the self-directed learning project with [the professor] and our conversations together. And my academic supervisor helped in conversations in terms of my edges and getting in touch with what it was that was making me feel uncomfortable about certain things. That directed focus and questioning helped me get in touch with where I was in terms of level of confidence or what was affecting or holding me back in terms of doing certain things."

> "I remember one time in the middle of the SDLP [self-designed learning project] I was thinking, like this is not making any sense and flipping out and then going in to [the Professor] in tears. It was very helpful as she put it into perspective – I was in the valley and she helped me see the next steps or understand the next peak and know that I won't be stuck in the valley forever."

However, some alumni point out that the container offered by faculty is not always adequate to support students through the difficulties they face:

> "I was a little bit afraid of approaching the faculty and going to go talk to them about what was happening. During the graduating project course the faculty, in a project sense, was good but emotionally I did not feel supported."

> "There was a lack of containment – it was not an individual thing, it felt like they themselves were not united in how they were going to engage with the cohort. I think individually professors were helpful but as a whole there was a lack of dialogue between them."

> "The curriculum was well designed, however looking back when you are in the midst of it, it does not feel that way."

At the same time, we note that several students acknowledge their own misgivings about authority figures (including their HSI professors), and point out that they were unwilling to accept the offers of support. It may also be the case that some students become mesmerized by the unexpected intensity of the learning that they are experiencing, and they simply do not notice that their professors are keeping a close eye on the cohort and individual students. This, however, does not alter the fact that some students suggest that the HSI container at times is problematic.

Some students also suggest that there appears to be a lack of unity among faculty. As one alumnus said:

> "I am on the one hand really grateful that I got to be a part of this as it changed my life and will continue to do that, but I also think that there needs to be a more involved approach among faculty. It seems like each individual professor is designing their course and this design is intended to be dovetailing but I never got a sense that they worked together. I did not get that sense that they were there to intervene if necessary for the well being of the cohort and individual people."

In fact the graduate faculty does meet several times each year to discuss the functioning of the cohort and the wellbeing of students (and faculty also interact informally, sharing stories of the events that took place in class). At times, an intervention into the cohort as a whole or with specific students is agreed to and carried out. The program schedule even includes a block of time that is reserved for faculty interventions, if faculty believe that action is warranted. However, the fact that this is not apparent to students, and that some feel abandoned by their professors, is disconcerting.

Concluding thoughts on improving the student experience

Faculty engage in an ongoing process to monitor the status of individual students, and to consider the effectiveness of the program as a whole. In recent years, the intake process for the program has been revised to include group presentations and interviews, and to replace the T-Group prerequisite laboratory with a laboratory experience that incorporates task work and an assessment of the prospective student's capacity to benefit from experiential learning. One goal of these monitoring and evaluation activities is to assure the well-being of students during a difficult and intense period of personal transformation.

Perhaps part of the explanation for the concerns expressed by alumni lies in the fact that since its inception the program has seen a move from a dedicated core team of three faculty members who guided the students through all courses for two years, to a larger faculty team. Today, the ten courses

are usually taught by at least seven and as many as ten different professors. During the first year students assemble once a month for three-day weekends, and each weekend anywhere from three to five courses might be taught. Faculty members work together to plan these weekends, but no one faculty member remains with the cohort throughout the three days. This can be seen as a positive change in the program, allowing students to be exposed to more perspectives and approaches, but an unintended consequence might be that faculty members now have an incomplete understanding of the status of individual students and the cohort community. Faculty members arrive in the classroom relatively unaware of the prevailing dynamics in the cohort.

This dispersion of faculty, however, may also help to keep the evolving paradigm of the HSI Master's program generative and adaptive. The creative tension between faculty members – for instance, between individual, group, and systemic viewpoints, between theoretical preferences for sensemaking, social learning, open systems theory, complexity science, implementation science, and so on, and between engagement with a consulting or a research practice—contributes to a model in which diverse perspectives and approaches are open to confrontation, and each student is offered a multitude of alternatives, sometimes aligned, sometimes adversarial, as they learn about how people experience change. As opposed to the three-professor faculty, this more complex model of loosely coupled individuals may open up room for more diverse inquiry and representation, so that students do not feel coerced into a single way of thinking and being.

The idea of coercion raises another aspect of educational practice that faculty are currently reflecting on. HSI students are encouraged to consider the role of power dynamics in their client systems. Of course, power dynamics are also evident within the cohort, and in the interactions between students and faculty. Power can be used to impose, through a conversation that is labelled as dialogue, meanings and interpretations upon the experiences of others (Vince, 1998). Indeed, some management

theorists have suggested that one of management's roles is to engage in "sensegiving" rather than sensemaking—to give meaning to the experiences of others, usually subordinates (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Maitlis, 2005). Faculty must thus walk a fine line. Though faculty members use their power to create dialogical spaces where students can safely inquire into the meaning of their experience, students are well aware that faculty will ultimately read assignments and assign grades. Students therefore experience a tension between the invitation to participate in conversations that inquire into the meaning of experience, and the need to satisfy faculty expectations. Both faculty and students must find ways to manage and resolve this tension.

A partial solution is to ensure that student behaviour is not subject to evaluation during the program's first year. Though students participate in many experiences, including a practicum consulting project, they are graded entirely on the basis of written work. Nevertheless, the tension caused by the power imbalance between students and faculty is a continuing part of the student experience. Perhaps faculty might find a way to incorporate this tension into the curriculum. Vince (2002) has suggested that processes of organizing involve an ongoing tension between impulses toward control and democracy. In HSI, students often form themselves into a self-managing team to carry out a task such as conducting research and producing a report; at the same time, faculty set the rules for the assignment, set the deadlines, and read and assign a grade to the paper. As Cunliffe (2002) points out, "Within traditional management education, the manager/teacher is expert and in control of the learning process as he or she disseminates information. However, from a social constructionist perspective, learning is seen as a constitutive activity in which teachers and learners are participants and co-authors in the creative dialogical process of learning" (p. 47). Given the requirements of the larger educational institution, this tension may be inevitable. At the very least, however, the dialogical processes used in the program might be a way of incorporating power imbalances more overtly into the curriculum.

Students begin their HSI journey with a desire to learn the secrets of organizational change. By the time they graduate, many students have realized that to bring beneficial change to human systems, they must begin by changing themselves. An effective intervener in human systems must be ethically grounded, must resist the temptation to impose autocratic solutions on people, and must begin with an awareness of themselves, their biases, strengths, weaknesses, and how they are typically perceived by others. To achieve mastery of human systems intervention, the intervener realizes that in environments where social change does not rely solely upon issues of logic and technology, but also calls on values, questions of right and wrong, and contextual narratives that recount unique experiences, the change agent is not the one who possesses the right answer, but is rather the one who creates a caring space for discovery, inquiry, and the creation of shared meaning and resolve. Through uncertainty comes synthesis; out of disconfirmation emerges a renewed, confident master of human systems intervention.

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