

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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Creating Global Conversations about “Intergenerativity” to Foster Innovation

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We have been drawn together about a concept we are calling intergenerativity, which to us means fostering a meaningful fusion of conversations and experiences among often disconnected sources of human creativity like generations, disciplines or nations that inspires new possibilities and innovative actions. It is based upon concepts of generativity that Gervase Bushe, Ken Gergen and Donald Schon (2013, pp. 91-92) propose as “processes and capacities that help people see old things in new ways, reconsidering that which is taken for granted and furnishing new alternatives for social actions.” Bush offers a description of generativity as “occurring through the creation of new images, metaphors, and representations that have two qualities: they change how people think so that new options [...] and/or actions become available to them (in ways that) people want to act upon them.” Intergenerativity builds on these ideas through intentionally engaging diversity with a specific focus on the relational space-in-between. It embraces differences as a relational resource for transformative potential. *Intergenerativity* can be applied to fields of endeavor from learning to health to community development.

In this article, we offer snippets of stories we have shared with each other over the years related to this concept and how we see intergenerativity connected to social construction.

Kristin: Peter, I love the story you told me about Ms. Kelsey. Can you share that with us?

Peter: I love this story too and sharing it with you Kristin, just as Ms. Kelsey shared her love of stories and love of learning with our children in The Intergenerational School. In fact, she received our Volunteer of the Year Award a few years ago, but needed to be reminded by her daughter why. She had such a severe memory problem she could not remember she volunteered every week! But boy was she present in the moment. So this is a story that bridges the often negative, falsely hopeful world of dementia medicine with the positive aspirations we have for developing inclusive, diversity celebrating learning communities. This story demonstrates the power of intergenerativity bridging disciplines and generations.

Kristin: What I found powerful about this story, is Ms. Kelsey’s level of social connection as a volunteer compared to the increasing social isolation that can result from dominant discourses and stigma about dementia. In your story, Ms. Kelsey is highly valued, and her experience in each moment is significant, regardless if she remembers it the next day. It is almost a magnification of relational responsibility – in which we are focusing on and responsible to the process of relating and the meaning we are making, *in each moment*. (1)

Peter: When you talk about a focus on the process of relating, it reminds me of Ms. Mary Peery and Larry and Deshaun. Can you share this story with us?

Kristin: This story is very close to my heart. Ms. Peery, Deshaun and Larry met at an intergenerational peace circle in the Austin neighborhood of west side Chicago. Deshaun and Larry decided to make a change in their community after hearing Ms. Peery talk about her community gardens and about her dream of youth and senior citizens coming together to stop the negativity in the Austin community. From this intergenerational peace circle, relationships were sparked that led to collaborative social action between generations.



Peter: Yes! I particularly love this story because of being able to meet this intergenerational team and see their work. What inspires me about this story is that when we are able to tap into this kind of intergenerativity, we uproot limitations created by socially constructed labels, often influenced by negative discourses, in order to construct new possible futures.

Kristin: I agree! I think we have all heard certain young people being labeled as thugs or delinquent, which gets in the way of us being able to see their strengths, hopes, and abilities to contribute to schools, families and communities. Intergenerativity, to me, helps us to see new possibilities, when the glue that makes labels stick dissolves in our processes of relating.



Kristin: Can you share the story about theatre-based storytelling as another way to bring different disciplines together to foster innovation?

Peter: On the 15th anniversary of Intergenerational Schools we began an initiative called “The Intergenerativity Project”. This fall, we will be collecting stories and next year we will perform a community play based around those stories. Art, music, and dance are some of the most intergenerative activities we can engage in together.

Kristin: This reminds me of all of the forms of language we engage in as we socially construct meaning. These many different ways we perform together help to destabilize what we take as certain, increasing mystery and creativity for emergence.

Peter: I loved when you shared with me about your partnerships in Uganda, bringing youth and older persons together to address community issues. These stories also help me to see the possibilities for international collaboration.

Kristin: I can share a story that connects to your storytelling project and will also bring another Taos Associate into our conversation. Celiane Camargo Borges and I visited our partners in Uganda and participated in a Photovoice project. This project also demonstrated the potential for using arts and narrative to develop shared and coordinated meaning. Young people from two villages developed stories from their experiences in Uganda. They invited people from the community to visit their Photovoice exhibit. Older persons joined in the storytelling, both from a curiosity standpoint, to better understand the experiences of the young people, and to also share their own experiences. These shared stories began a rich weaving of meaning and a strengthening of relationships.

Peter/Kristin: Connected to what Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett (2001) propose, intergenerativity is a resource for “how we create our worlds in what we *do* together”, in which new transformative meanings and actions are sparked by bringing together different generations, disciplines, or nations into interdependent relations.

Citations:

Bushe, G. R. (2013). Generative Process, Generative Outcome: The Transformational Potential of Appreciative Inquiry. *Organizational Generativity: The Appreciative Inquiry Summit and a Scholarship of Transformation Advances in Appreciative Inquiry*, 89-113.

Gergen, K., McNamee, S., & Barrett, F. (2001). Toward a vocabulary of transformative dialogue. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 24, 697-707.

http://www.swarthmore.edu/Documents/faculty/gergen/Toward_A_Vocabulary_of_Transformative_Dialogue.pdf