

Making Magic: Facilitating Collaborative Processes

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Abstract

I am passionate about being a facilitator, working with people to provide opportunities that enhance their ability to learn, to work interdependently with others to achieve group outcomes or tasks through collaborative processes, and to have fun doing so. This paper presents the results of my doctoral research (2005) that examined the meaning and value of ‘making magic,’ facilitating collaborative processes. ‘Making magic’ is a metaphor for the peak experiences that happen when facilitating groups in workplace, community, and/or classroom settings. The primary findings of this inquiry are the notions of critical appreciative processes, and ‘making magic’ through being present, vulnerable and courageous.

Magical Quilt



The thesis is a magical quilt of stories, themes, literature, and analysis. In this paper I present the highlights of this quilt: magical fabric (introduction), the magical inquiry (methodology), magical notions (literature review), magical snippets and themes (data & analysis) and ongoing magic (conclusion & implications). Included in italics are stories and quotes from the participants. My magic facilitator wand, pictured here, is a multi-coloured feather duster covered in trinkets of various sorts given to me by participants in my workshops and courses. It symbolizes the playfulness that I bring to the serious business of facilitating groups.

Magical Fabric – introduction

I think it's a gift to be able to reflect on one's practice. For me it's a vertical and a horizontal gift. The horizontal gift is the circle both online and here, hearing and experiencing and the vertical is digging down inside myself and being able to talk on a very, very deep level. (Liz, collaborative face-to-face conversation)

Four other educational/organizational consultants joined me in this inquiry that was itself a collaborative process that I facilitated in three stages: interviews; collaborative conversation; and data analysis. The quote above from Liz, one of the participants, illustrates the powerful nature of the experience of research that creates space to reflect on practice. In our consulting practices, we all facilitate various kinds of group processes including teaching, workshops, workplace group development, and organizational change. We all had stories to tell of ‘making magic,’ peak experiences where some kind of enchantment and transformation occurred within the group. The purpose of our inquiry was to explore deeply our ‘making magic,’ work.

Magical Inquiry – methodology

I chose to use a narrative approach to collecting, analyzing, and representing data (Chapman, 2004). Throughout the research I used narrative to construct knowledge about the meaning of ‘making magic,’ to construct social reality through story telling (Avray, 2002) with the other consultants. My own stories were also included, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, “narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical” (p. 121). Through the interview process I invited narratives from the participants using appreciative inquiry (Watkins & Mohr, 2001) which, unlike traditional deficit-based approaches that focus on problems to be solved, focuses on what already exists that is working well in order to grow or appreciate it. In our case, ‘making magic’ was what we wanted more of. Appreciative inquiry is a type of narrative inquiry because the data for the inquiry is collected through storytelling. It is also a type of collaborative inquiry (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000) where a group of peers explore their practices. This group of peers, the ‘magical group,’ began as researcher (Jeanie) and participants (Glynis, Leslie, Liz, Sandy) and as the research became more collaborative we called ourselves co-researchers.

In stage one, I interviewed each of the others and was interviewed myself using the same questions. The questions were open-ended to promote storytelling and to allow themes to emerge. I grouped them into the following clusters: background, meaning of ‘making magic,’ appreciative inquiry, value of ‘making magic,’ and sustaining practice. In all of these clusters the questions elicited stories of our facilitating practices. From the interview transcripts I pulled out themes and stories.

In stage two, I facilitated our collaborative conversation by e-mail because we lived in different cities. I used facilitation tools that would engage us. This was not easy to do in a text-based asynchronous conversation because we did not have the visual and auditory signals present in face-to-face synchronous conversations. I began by asking each of them to introduce themselves, suggest agreements for working together and share their expectations of our process. I also responded, emphasizing my participant as well as facilitator/researcher role. One of them suggested that we meet at the end of our six week e-mail conversation. I modelled being flexible as a facilitator by organizing a face-to-face group meeting which was not part of the original research plan. In order to get them engaged in the e-mail conversation I sent out three pieces of initial analysis from the interviews to seed our collaborative conversation: a brief synthesis of the meaning and value of ‘making magic;’ five peak experience stories (one from each of us); and a poem that I wrote based on the themes. I felt vulnerable sending out this poem because I am not a poet. With each of these pieces I provided a prompt for them to respond to and I invited them to make comments; ask questions; analyze; write stories and/or poems; share ideas, resources, and techniques for how to ‘make magic.’ I called the stories snippets because I snipped them from the interviews using the interviewee’s words but removing any extraneous tangents to get to the essence of the story.

For six weeks the conversation emerged circling back and forth from stories to themes. We were all living busy lives throughout the time so people participated when they could.

Two of the others were particularly active, another participated more sporadically and the other very little due to life crises. In order to bring her present with the rest of the group I noted at the end of an e-mail that I was sorry to hear that she had not been feeling well. The others e-mailed sympathetic comments to her in response. It was much easier to be present together when we physically got together for our closing evening because of the immediacy and fullness of the communication through conversation, appreciation, co-facilitation, celebration with food, laughter, silence, stories, ideas...magic.

From both the e-mail and the face-to-face conversation I had more data, more stories and themes. In stage three, I immersed myself in the messiness of data analysis: quilting the snippets, stories, literature, and themes. As in any appreciative inquiry I followed the energy of the stories and the themes arising from them. I wrote snippets by taking them from the data, giving them each a title which was usually a main theme or idea from the story. I revised my literature review in response to the emerging themes. To represent the data and analysis, I quilted the snippets together with analysis of themes and relevant notions and threads from the literature. I wrote, read, discarded, re-wrote, identified and analyzed themes, re-ordered. Periodically I would get feedback from my co-researchers and thesis supervisor as I wrote, wrote, wrote...

Magical Notions - literature

Yesterday while I was meeting with my co-planning team of managers at the corporation, we quietly and thoughtfully created a customer service training day for 540 supervisors...weaving in all their requests, appreciative inquiry and multiple layers of excellent teaching and learning practice and as it emerged we just kept looking at each other in a place of solid knowing...and all felt goose bumps simultaneously...in the presence of magic...

(Leslie, collaborative e-mail conversation)

Two main areas of literature provide notions that inform and are informed by this inquiry: appreciative inquiry and transformative education. Appreciative inquiry is integral to this study, both methodologically and topically. I used appreciative inquiry as a research methodology and the models, theories and applications of appreciative inquiry inform our practices of 'making magic.' The qualities of appreciative inquiry are qualities of 'making magic,' collaboration, connection, imagination, creativity, energy, transformation and, of course, appreciation. Appreciative inquiry is a powerful framework for people to be present with each other, a key element of 'making magic.'

Appreciative inquiry is an "action research model for a humanly significant generative science of administration" that is made up of four dimensions: "best of 'what is;,' ideals of 'what might be;,' consent of 'what should be;,' and experiencing of 'what can be'" (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 160). Beginning with positive images, the best of 'what is,' energizes the people in an organization to creatively generate the future of their organization by building on these positive images (Cooperrider, 1999). Problems are not ignored but reframed. Behind every problem is a desire and through appreciative inquiry those desires can be discovered. Appreciative inquiry is a tool for human system change

and it is a way of being. It is used in organizational and community development, in education (Yballe & O'Connor, 2000; English, Fenwick and Parsons, 2003a), in building teams (Bushe, 2000), and in every day living (Bushe, 2001).

The transformative education literature adds a critical lens that is lacking in appreciative inquiry, the notions of the impact of social structural differences on people's ability to appreciate and be appreciated. The transformative education literature provides important threads for this inquiry through examination of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003; Brookfield, 2000) culture (Tisdell, 2003; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995), spirituality (O'Sullivan, 1999; Tisdell, 2003; English, Fenwick & Parsons, 2003b) and presence (Kessler, 2000; Baldwin, 1998; Palmer, 1998; hooks, 1994, 2003). Transformative learning is about a shift in attitude and habits of mind to become critically self-reflective (Mezirow, 2003). Facilitators of magic need to be critically reflective of their own habits of mind and to "uncover submerged power dynamics...and hegemonic assumptions" (Brookfield, 2000). As well, facilitators need to reflect on and respond to the impact of culture, the social constructions, such as race, class, gender and the complex combinations of these, on the possibility of transformation and learning (Tisdell, 2003). These differences impact people's ability to be appreciative, to be present, and to connect to one another. Culturally responsive facilitators create spaces that are inclusive of differences (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). To do so, many educators are arguing for a more holistic view of teaching and learning, where sacred spaces are created that take into consideration the spirit and emotions as well as the intellect and body (Tisdell, 2003; English, Fenwick & Parsons, 2003b, Kessler, 2000). These spaces invite people to become present with each other, being authentically who they are. This begins with facilitator presence. As facilitators, our identities are as important as our techniques (Palmer, 1998) and we "must practice being vulnerable..., being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit" (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

This study contributes the notion of critical appreciative processes to both the literature of appreciative inquiry and transformative education. The critical element of these processes is recognizing and challenging oppressive societal structures, and the appreciative element of these processes is the means for dialogue to transform those structures.

Magical Snippets and Themes – data and analysis

Tears, hugs and CEOs (Sandy, interview)

I facilitated a strategic planning process for the organization I work with in Texas. We did something that was a key part of the process. We held a funeral. This is something I've done fairly rarely and only in exceptional circumstances. In this case it worked. I set up the room like a darkened funeral room lit by candles. When everyone was in the room and seated around a rectangular table with a glass full of water or something alcoholic, their choice, we went around and made toasts. To make it safe, as in every round robin that I conduct, you can always choose to pass. Everyone that chose to participate made a toast to the old CEO and the old organization and then to the incoming CEO and the new organization. Some people kind of sloughed it off but most of the 20 plus people that we had in the room took it seriously. There were tears and there were hugs. The incoming

chairman of the board who'd sometimes had difficult relationships with the outgoing chairman/CEO made a truly heartfelt statement after the thing was over. He was almost in tears talking about what he'd learned from him and how meaningful the relationship had been. In the end, it was really very dramatic and psychologically things changed in that room that night. The next morning, it was clear that the new CEO was now 'the' CEO in everyone's mind and heart.

This snippet is an example of the kind of stories that we told to illustrate 'making magic.' It illustrates the inquiry's first major theme which was being present, facilitators and participants interconnecting authentically with each other. Being present was fundamental to our stories of magic and to the meaning of magic as transformation of both the group and the individuals within the group. This transformation happened through the collaborative processes where people became present with each other and made interpersonal connections in order to learn together and accomplish tasks. These stories illustrated the holistic nature of what we do as facilitators, which impacts both our strategies and who we are as facilitators, our presence. We created spaces where our spirits could meet through these connections of authentic selves and we did this by bringing intellectual, physical, and emotional strategies to create these magical (spiritual) spaces. We created these spaces by being present ourselves.

Themes that emerged that illustrated being present were the importance of emotions such as love, grief, joy and the expression through laughter and silence as well as stories. Through our stories we illustrated our different teaching perspectives; shared structures and strategies; and expressed our creativity, responsiveness, and caring for the people in our groups. The next snippet illustrates the challenges of facilitating and the second major theme, vulnerability and courage.

Magic through imperfection (Glynis, collaborative e-mail conversation)

I recall a particularly rich co-facilitation in which my partner and I needed to work through a number of professional and interpersonal issues with courage and sensitivity as we worked with the group over the course of a week. It was not a smooth week, and we sometimes struggled – hard work, and ultimately very rewarding. We learned from one another personally, professionally, and spiritually. This was a training of facilitators who would be working in partnerships. By the end of the week, my co-facilitator and I had done our work privately when that was more suitable, but we also shared what we felt was important to share about our negotiations and struggles and joys when it was appropriate. The magic at the end was STRONG. One of the things I think is best about co-facilitating is that we almost always get to model imperfection in a very genuine way. When it's magical, those moments of imperfection are the most shining moments of all.

We are vulnerable in this work and need courage to be creative, imaginative, intuitive and appreciative. Although we strive for magic it is often very challenging and may not happen. Through the collaborative conversation we shared our imperfections; fears; ways of dealing with conflict; failures; and difficult choices we make in doing this work. It is often through the challenges, as Glynis illustrates in the story above, that the magic is very strong.

Ongoing Magic - conclusion and implications

For me this was an opportunity to be with colleagues...that's cool because as consultants we're just out there alone a lot. So this collegiality was rich for me. (Leslie, collaborative face-to-face conversation)

The inquiry concluded that the meaning of 'making magic' is facilitating the transformation, the alchemy that happens when the people in the group are interconnected and authentic with each other, present with each other, in order to work and learn effectively together. We intentionally create spaces for the possibility of magic through a variety of strategies and by being present, vulnerable and courageous ourselves, being who we are, as we facilitate. Through this inquiry we experienced magic as we transformed ourselves from five people who did not all know each other to an interconnected, deeply reflective group of practitioners. Each of us came away with our own transformative learning, and appreciation for each other, for the challenging work that we do and for the opportunity for professional connections such as these.

The value of 'making magic' is the possibility of constructive change in the worlds within which we facilitate to more magical places where people's hearts, souls, and minds are all present. It is of value to us because through this work we learn and grow. It gives us joy.

This inquiry had two main implications for facilitator (teacher, professor, trainer, group leader) development, firstly, to teach facilitators about critical appreciative processes and, secondly, to provide opportunities for them to reflect on both who they are, their identities, and what they do, their techniques. Critical appreciative processes create sacred spaces where participants are appreciated and respected for their differences, and where social structural impacts are acknowledged and challenged. Reflecting on their identities and techniques allows facilitators opportunities to learn and grow in order to create opportunities for their participants to be present and engaged in their own learning and growing.

The two major impacts on my practice of 'making magic' are, firstly, the feeling of being much more grounded in myself, more authentic, more present as a facilitator, who I am, and, secondly, the deepening of my tool kit, the increase in my resources, conceptual and applied. I feel, like Palmer (2000), that I have found my inner calling, my vocation that is "a gift to be received" (p. 10). The following story is an example of the kind of work that I am passionate about and my inner voice is calling me to do.

Does that always happen? (Jeanie)

After handing in the first draft of my thesis, I facilitated an appreciative inquiry and community development workshop for federal government employees to introduce them to some basic appreciative inquiry concepts and models to use in their work with First Nations' communities. It was a lot to do in four hours. None of the participants were First Nations. Four participants were 'trainees,' expected to be there as part of their job

training. The rest of the group included their supervisor, the trainer who had hired me, and two others who worked in the team in other capacities and who were interested in the topic. I could sense as the 'trainees' came into the room that some of them were not keen to be there. "Oh, dear," I thought, "this will be a challenge," feeling a little nervous about how they might receive me. I introduced myself (and my wand) and proceeded to build an appreciative climate. I presented some theory then they did appreciative interviews and group development of provocative propositions and images around the topic of working with First Nations' groups. I talked about the impact of power and privilege on people's ability to be appreciative. Throughout the session, I told stories and they told stories, stories of our experiences working with First Nations' groups. The transformation to a more engaged and connected group began in the climate setting and increased through the interviews gaining further momentum in the group work, and was fully apparent in the whole group debrief and closure. In the closing circle, passing my magic wand around, each person spoke in a very emotional way about the power of the experience and their appreciation of each other. So I wasn't surprised when Mary, who had hired me, called me later and asked incredulously, "does that always happen?" She was amazed by how much had happened, all the original outcomes and, more powerfully, the unexpected outcomes, the depth of emotions that people shared and the transformation of the group to an interconnected whole. "How wonderful," I thought to myself, "she saw the magic."

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