

Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute

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Approaching Change as a Creative Process

By Karen Dawson, Taos PhD graduate and Taos Associate

Three years ago, Julie Huffaker, Ian Prinsloo and I began experimenting with new ways to support organizational leaders create change. Ian (London, UK) directs groundbreaking live theatre and his graduate studies explored what business leaders might learn from the rehearsal process of professional actors. Julie (Portland, OR) and I (Calgary, Canada) have been avid students, teachers, directors and applicers of improvisational theatre within our respective consulting practices. Julie is a doctoral candidate at the Fielding Institute and I am a recent graduate of the Taos Institute Ph.D. program. Despite differences in our clientele and home habitat, we are committed to nurturing effective, playful, co-creative processes in organizations. I am the only self-professed social constructionist of our trio. Julie and Ian nod their respective heads politely whenever I overuse constructionist jargon and gently suggest, “Shall we experiment with the ideas and put them into practice to see what happens instead of talking about them?” I always appreciate the nudge.

The invitation to collaborate and experiment came from the leadership development team at The Banff Centre in Canada, a beautiful place in the Rocky Mountains where leadership and the arts collide. We started exploring the differences between how most organizations think about change, and how professional creators – theatre directors, improvisational theatre troupes, film ensembles – do. (SPOILER ALERT: the differences are HUGE.)

Here was our stimulus: heaps of smart people have spent a whole lot of time trying to crack the nut of organizational change: how do we pull it off so we can be more innovative, creative, efficient...[insert your desired state here]? Reams of books and consulting practices are built around attempts to provide an answer to this question with (unfortunately) relatively low success, and high frustration. When smart folks make little progress, they seek support of a different kind. This is where we (and The Banff Centre) come in.

Ian, Julie and I work in the consulting world. We also have deep experience with what feels like a different world, a world where groups reliably pull off this kind of change and where they consistently produce something completely new that leaves their marketplaces (and each other) utterly delighted and ready for more. That world is the world of creators. Our hunch: if we think of organizational change as creating, and approach it the way skilled creators do, we can get radically different results.

What does this look like in practice? Our clients bring a real change challenge with them. We curate a theatre experience during which they learn, play, stretch, rehearse and perform together for an audience. We unpack and reflect on what happened among us that allowed them to co-

create their delightful performance (a performance that none of them could ever have imagined before) and then we ask: *what might shift if you approached your own change challenge as a process of creation?*

Depending on the context, over the next day, weeks, and sometimes months we explore, play with, and apply principles that support creative processes to their real world challenges. Again, depending on the engagement, we offer follow up and coaching as they head off to co-create in their world.

I see intriguing connections and relationships among our work and the ideas and theories I've learned from all of my cherished Taos Institute colleagues.

The five interconnected principles that we suggest support collaborative co-creating are:

- **Embrace Emergence:** assume complexity and believe that it will be through interacting and relating with each other that new possibilities and new futures will emerge
- **Nourish Ensemble:** when we deliberately attend to the relational domain in which we work we increase the likelihood that we can step forward together more effectively into the unknown
- **Design Skillful Rehearsals and Adaptive Performances:** we intentionally toggle back and forth between rigorous inquiry (rehearsal) and iterative prototyping (adaptive performances) as we surface our assumptions, test them in the world, and allow our new learning to inform the next rigorous rehearsal
- **Tap into Source:** we invite co-creators to share their thinking publicly within the ensemble (even when that feels uncomfortable) because it is through relating with each others' rich experience and raw insights that we increase our chances of creating something remarkable together
- **Do More than Talk:** action – trying things together – accelerates learning and we get clearer on what works, what doesn't work, and what new questions are worthy of exploration

We want to share this little video as we learn our way into communicating these ideas. It's a window into what we've been playing with and how we think it can help. We had a blast of an adventure making it. Take a peek; share it with any changemakers you think might be intrigued. And know we'd love to hear from you: What's all this got YOU thinking about?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nkZmo4IEIM&feature=youtu.be>