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Partners in Life — Syntony at Work

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*In unity there is infinite interfusion of diversities,
but in each diversity we find the total potentiality of unity.*
- C. Chang

Coming together

Before we met, our lives were so different and our experiences so distant, that it would have been difficult to imagine a common future. I was born and raised in Mexico and lived 22 years of my life in the same house with my parents and my younger brother were I was born. Most of my extended family still live in the same town. My family was middle class, we traveled very little, and my whole world was grounded in Mexican culture. I can see myself as a tree with a very strong single root. I was working at a research institute within a university. A visiting scholar arrived. He was a foreigner, and so attractive...

I was born in Switzerland and grew up there and in Italy, although all my education is State-based. My father is Hungarian, my mother is a Swedish-Finn, my brother was born in Germany, and his wife is from Madras, India. Until just last year, my brother and his family were living in the Czech Republic and I was living in Mexico, while our parents continue to live in Italy. I sort of feel like a chameleon of—and in—different cultures. More than as a tree, I see myself as grass with a network of many surface roots. I was invited to give a summer seminar in Mexico and ended up stayed there for 4 years. Her office was across the hall, in front of mine. It was motivating to go to work. It was distracting trying to work.

For me, getting to know him was in many ways learning about the world, and I was fascinated by the possibilities beyond my microcosm. Getting to know him brought the most intense period of self-knowing in my life; the time when I questioned everything—starting with myself and my culture. I was still

living with my parents—in Mexico a woman is taken care of by her parents until she gets married, and then she is taken care of by her husband—when we started to go out. My parents were not very happy about my new relationship. For them there were two possible scenarios: either he is just having fun with me while living in Mexico and then he will go to another country, leaving me behind with a bad reputation; or he is taking our relationship seriously, will ask my hand in marriage, and then will leave Mexico taking me with him, far from them. Neither of these options made them happy. I had conflicts with my parents every day and found I was unable to communicate with them. They realized that I was changing, faster than ever, and they got worried—they thought that he was the one changing me.

One day, during a period when things were particularly rough with her parents, I dropped by their home to talk while she was not there. They were surprised to see me there, and their first reaction was to tell me that she wasn't home. I told them I just wanted to open a dialogue and that I was there to discuss any questions or concerns they might have. I thought that part of the problem was that I represented something completely unknown—a different culture. We ended up having a five hour conversation, and although it was sincere and non-confrontational, it did not improve the relationship between them and their daughter. Most of our energies as couple continued to be dedicated to coping with the family situation. There was not much space in our lives to think about and enjoy each other just then...

I finally made a very difficult decision. I needed to move out of my parents home. Living on my own meant that I could create my own rules. This created the space for exploring our relationship—romantically, socially, and professionally.

Our relationship was great again. But with all these decisive life-changes, I was starting to feel somewhat nervous about “what next”. In the Mexican culture, if things are going well and demonstrations of mutual commitment are made, the next step is marriage. At that time I felt just barely responsible enough for myself, so how could I share responsibility for two?

My family situation did not improve. In fact, it got worse every day. They wanted me to go back home. In the eyes of society, a young woman living alone is sinful. When I discussed with him the situation with my family it was always useful because he helped me to understand my experience from a different and broader point of view. However, the future was blurry. I could see him in my future, but I did not feel that he saw me in his. One day, I raised the issue. I told him that I would like us to be together, to be partners in life. I told him that I did not care about marriage. But I did care about our partnership. One month later we were engaged—that is, committed to each other. Four months after that we were married.

Ever since then, we have been purposefully and consciously co-creating our relationship and our future. As partners in life, we work, learn, and play together—in syntony.

Being together

Although our life passions were different, they were closely related and were one of the main attractors that brought us together. It has been through our daily collaboration in learning, working, playing, and living in general that these passions have come to be so closely related that by now they form one integral area of learning for life. Together, we bring to the table concerns, interests, knowledge, tools, and experiences related to societal evolution, sustainable development, technology policy, systems design, business, education, and human science. Our life passions are more than intellectual interests; they are the source of our inspiration and strength in our personal lives and the means through which we create meaning and seek to contribute to the world. We have found that together we can explore the implications for everyday living that arise from the pattern of being that we have been weaving with the strands of our unfolding relationship.

Ever since high-school I had been interested in the relationship between human and environment (both socio-cultural and naturo-physical). To begin with, I studied social and cultural anthropology, trying to learn more about how different peoples infuse their worlds with meaning. Upon entering college, I decided to major in political science and minor in human physiology with the stated purpose, “to study political philosophy as it relates to the advancement of science and technology in the contemporary world”—with particular regard to the positive and negative potential of bioengineering. My intellectual passion soon led to bioethics, but I found that I had to keep my interests in the humanities and the sciences as separate and parallel courses of study. Until I entered graduate school. There I found the systems approach, and with it, a rubric under which to unify my quest for understanding the human as both a bio-physical and a socio-cultural being. It soon became clear to me that my real interest was in issues of national development planning: how can a people develop their own ways of thinking, doing, and being without having to submit to the hegemony of technology transferred from some other culture? Graduate study centered on the quest for sustainable development strategies. When I went to Mexico, upon completion of my doctoral studies in science and technology policy, I was in full stride on this path. Then I met her.

When I was little I wanted to become a teacher since I loved learning, and still do! So I did well in school, I guess you could say that I excelled. When I was a teenager I volunteered for community service in my church and soon found myself playing a leading role in getting other young people involved in social outreach programs. When I entered college, I decided that I would study business administration. I thought that this would be the best way for me to find out how people can become productive members of society. To channel this interest, I chose to major in marketing and focused on identifying and creating ways to satisfy human needs. I soon found myself disgusted with the consumerist orientation of this field, and I began exploring other ways of using my marketing skills—such as identifying social and educational needs and how to fulfill them. When I graduated I began working as a consultant helping micro-businesses (family based companies) to learn how to survive through the economic challenges that were sweeping Mexico. But before I got very far with this I was offered a scholarship to continue my studies at the graduate level, and without thinking too much about it, I began an MBA. At the same time I was working as a research assistant in an educational research institute at the university. What I was learning in my studies was incongruent with what I was learning there, in my work. I was dissatisfied and felt that I was not on the right path. Then I met him.

It seemed to me that the sort of thing she was interested in was directly related to the sort of think I was interested in. And I may have been right, but as we got to know each other, both of our interests changed! Her interest in issues of individual empowerment and my interest in group empowerment became mixed. I began to realize that societal development is based on individual development: there is no social empowerment without emancipated individuals. So I became interested in learning—as a subject (as well as an object) of study. I accepted the position of Dean of a doctoral program in management in order to learn more directly about the management of learning. Through discussions with her, I realized that I could bring to this pursuit my understanding of group dynamics, my systems perspective, and my knowledge of technology and culture. I decided to approach the issue of life-long-learning from the perspective of what kind of learning path would lead to the sustainable development of human life with Earth.

Our talks often turned to questions of learning how to learn, and especially of learning how to deal with the challenges of life in a world of rapid change. I came to (re)discover my passion and interest in learning processes, and so I switched the focus of my studies and completed my masters in the area of education with a concentration in cognitive development. I realized that I was working from the individual

out to society—even from within the individual, considering learning styles and orientations. He was working from society down to the individual—looking at the meaning that individual learning could play in societal evolution. It was fascinating to talk to him.

We came up with all sorts of ideas—we published an article together on interactive learning environments for future generation (Laszlo & Castro, 1995); we went to conferences together; we got involved in, and eventually began facilitating, the research efforts of a team of scholar-practitioners from the International Systems Institute on evolutionary learning communities (ELCs). But the exploration of these ideas were tangential to our professional duties. We had each other to talk to, but there were precious few others around who we could really work with. We wanted these interests to be at the core of our lives. And then it happened.

I received a Fulbright scholarship to pursue doctoral study in San Francisco. We decided to drop everything and move. It wasn't easy for either of us; for me because I had never lived outside of Mexico, and for him because it was a leap out of a secure professional path into a void of uncertainty and possibility. But we did it. And we found a way to be together, or rather, to become together, that allows us to work, play, and learn twenty-four hours a day—together. We have creatively combined our school and job obligations in a flexible lifestyle, and we do it from a safe and comfortable space—from home. This has meant that we have found a way to walk our talk, a way of integrating in our everyday experiences those activities that we feel make us more whole. It has been very challenging, however. Interestingly enough, we only recently realized that our path has been a *syntony quest*.

Learning together

Learning is the cornerstone of our life. We believe that human development is a continuous process of becoming; the process of synergistically synthesizing the unique essence of each person with what others are; the process of harmonizing with others and with nature. The richer the synthesis, the fuller and more enlightened we become. We think that it would be more accurate to call ourselves human “becomings,” instead of human beings, to connote the need to be fully aware of our ever changing, evolving nature.

Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell declared that “we have to learn to think in a new way” (1957). They pointed to possibilities for a better future through our ability to think, to learn, and to live in new ways. A new way of thinking implies the

understanding of the complementary unity of apparent opposites and of the interactions that join them, instead of focusing on the competitive characteristics that exist between them (Morin, 1992, p. 373). This is systems thinking, and according to a systems view, “opposites”—such as self and other, men and women, mind and body, reason and emotion, science and spirituality, east and west, society and ecosystem—are interdependent complements that form a harmonious whole. Every human being personifies this wholeness, but it has been artificially fragmented by our dominant ways of thinking about and interpreting reality. We should look for integration in a systems view of the world and a new consciousness. We believe that a new age for humanity requires an evolved consciousness that transcends the dominator paradigm and reaches a paradigm of trust, empathy and interconnection between humans and nature (Montuori, 1989, p. 328-329). The evolution of our individual and collective consciousness is perhaps the most crucial contemporary challenge we face.

Through a process of divergence and creativity the interaction of our ideas have converged on a shared image. David Loye and Riane Eisler suggest the there need for “prohuman images of the future” (1987, p. 57). Our image takes the shape of communities that strive toward sustainable pathways for evolutionary development in synergistic interaction with their milieu, through individual and collective processes of learning and empowerment. We call this image the “evolutionary learning community” (ELC) (K.C. Laszlo, 1996). Through a commitment to understanding and contributing to evolutionary processes, and formed by individuals dedicated to the creation of sustainable ways of being and becoming, such communities “will make possible to experience flow while working for the most ambitious goal available to the human imagination: to blend our individual voice in the cosmic harmony, to join our unique consciousness with the emerging consciousness of the universe, to fold our momentary center of psychic energy into the current that tends toward increasing complexity and order” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 293). We want to catalyze the emergence of ELCs in the world, and we, as partners and as family, want also to be one of them.

Transcending together

What is an authentic community? How does it relate to an evolutionary learning community? These questions are relevant to us at both the personal and professional

levels. A community can be defined as a group of two or more individuals with a shared identity and a common purpose committed to the joint creation of meaning. Yet there's more to an ELC than that. One of the core characteristics of an authentic community, as described M. Scott Peck, seems to be its synergic character. He suggests that a community is more of "a way of being together with both individual authenticity and interpersonal harmony so that people become able to function with a collective energy even greater than the sum of their individual energies" (in Banathy, 1996, p. 239). Authentic communities are able to enhance their own development while at the same time enhancing that of each individual in the community, thereby promoting both freedom of personal choice and a sense of responsibility for the whole. As a result, individual and collective interests coexist in a synergic relationship. The principle is that of 'unity in diversity'. The common purpose of the community *transcends* (is not compromised of) self-interest.

But how to transcend? And into what? In our case, the image of an idealized ELC served as our "state attractor." We sought to engage in the journey of translating our vision of what an ELC could be into its embodiment in the form our personal/professional partnership. To engage in this journey, we charted out the path we would have to take. The first challenge in the process of becoming an ELC would be to become a community; an authentic community. Non-trivial challenges such as this seemed to mark the major stages along the journey to become an ELC. The path lead to a series of successive transformations, from authentic community to learning community to designing community to evolutionary learning community (Figure 1).

These stages can be perceived through the lenses of General Evolution Theory (E. Laszlo, 1997) such that each subsequent stage involves a leap from the previous stage toward a higher level of organization, structural complexity, and dynamism and autonomy through greater differentiation and integration of structure and function, and more efficacious coordination of process. The transition from one stage to another, for instance from authentic community to learning community, involves a bifurcation (indicated by a "B" in figure 1). That is, it involves a chaotic period when both threats to, and opportunities for, transformative change coexist. The evolution of a human activity system into an evolutionary learning community does not trace a path of smooth and continuous change, but one that involves transcendence—or discontinuous change—from one stage to the next. As higher levels of complexity are reached, the

community becomes progressively more able to shape change and create its future. Thus, as with other general evolutionary processes, the process by which an ELC emerges is exponential in character.

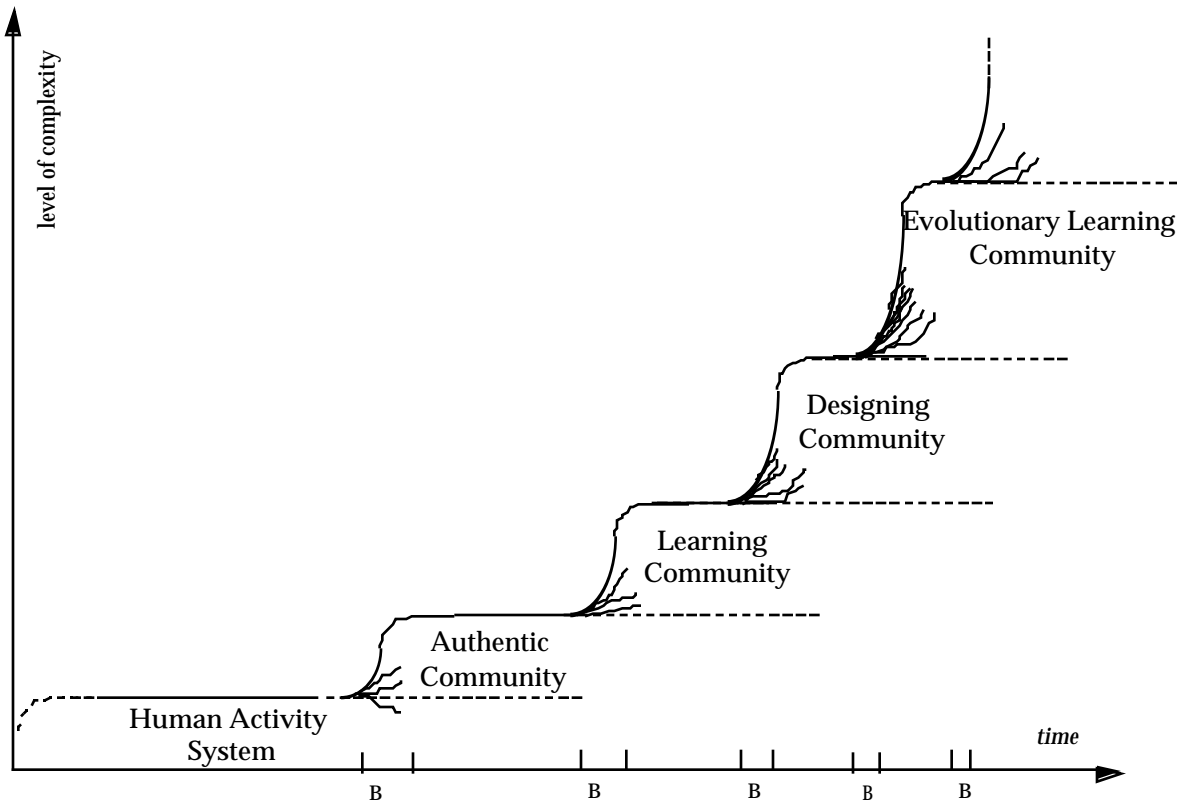


Figure 1. The emergence of evolutionary learning communities (ELCs)

An authentic community creates the context for collaborative learning and co-design. A community attracted by the ideal of becoming an ELC—an authentic community with evolutionary consciousness—has the opportunity to engage in a purposeful creative effort to make it happen. When the community is ready to make the commitment to become a learning community, the members engage in a process of learning-how-to-learn that includes the development of a systems view of the world and the acquisition of both design and evolutionary literacies. This transformative learning stage creates the conditions for action. It marks the point at which the learning community faces the challenge and the opportunity of transcending to a designing community. The designing community is one which seeks to manifest an evolutionary ethic in everyday living. The task of the designing community is to design itself into an authentic and unique ELC based on the acquisition of design and evolutionary

competencies. A designing community will need to integrate ideals and actions in ways that help live its design. The implementation and institution of a designed ELC marks the stage where the individuals and the community are fully empowered as stewards of their ongoing evolution.

In our own quest to become an ELC, we began with the challenge of how to enhance our differences, honor our commonalities, and create synergy through coordinated action. We sought to create a system where we could feel comfortable, secure, and supported; where we could explore our individual potential and enjoy being together.

Banathy (1996) presents *generative dialogue* as the core transformative process for a group to become an authentic community. He suggest that the involvement in generative dialogue “will lead to the creation of collective consciousness, collective inquiry that focuses on the thoughts, values, and worldviews of the group and creates a flow of shared meaning, shared perceptions, a shared worldview, and a social milieu of friendship and fellowship” (p. 219). Once the community has bonded, and if there exists the intention and the commitment, they can then enter into *strategic dialogue* through a focus on communal activities of learning and designing. When dialogue consists of collective learning and coordinated action, paradigm exploration, cultural healing, and collective creation inspired by a shared vision of the future (Isaacs in Banathy, 1996, p. 217), the community is on its way to become one of learning and design.

As currently conceived, the generative dialogue phase consist of an open space for interpersonal communication. In contrast, the strategic dialogue phase is supported by the disciplined inquiry of social systems design. As such, strategic dialogue is much more robustly supported than is generative dialogue. Nevertheless, without effective generative dialogue the group will not be prepared to deal with the strategic issues of learning and designing together. In our experience of working with various forms of community, the generative phase is successful only some of the time—that is to say, we are not always able to build community and move forward in our common purpose. Creating community requires both processes of divergence (such as exploration of the different values, points of view, ideas, and experiences of the member of the group) and processes of convergence (such as co-creation of shared vision and values and agreement on next steps). Sometimes it is difficult to engage fully in the processes of

convergence since those of divergence involve chaos, uncertainty, and in some cases, even discord.

Our work focuses on the co-creation of evolutionary learning communities through evolutionary systems design (A. Laszlo, 1996), but until recently it lacked a formal methodology of generative dialogue for developing the basis of community. Then we learned about synergic inquiry (SI) (Tang, 1997): a process that facilitates the interpersonal expansion of consciousness and promotes differentiation and integration—core phases in evolutionary dynamics. Methodologically, it can be considered a tool for guiding open communication that facilitates the consolidation of a group as an authentic community. As such, we believe that it has potential to provide a facilitative framework for generative dialogue in much the same way that social systems design supports the disciplined inquiry of strategic dialogue.

SI involves two phases of differentiation: self-knowing and other-knowing; and two phases of integration: differences-holding and differences-transcending (Tang, 1997, p. 16-17). It is conceived as a process for the expansion of consciousness that facilitates the transcendence of differences in order to reach deeper levels of understanding, respect, and collaboration. What we found most interesting in the SI framework is that it presents a way of understanding those aspects of divergent and convergent processes in a group dynamic that are required for becoming an authentic community. Understanding how individuals in a group differentiate and integrate to form community—in a reflective and metacognitive process—can facilitate a path of transcendence by creating the conditions for coordinated action through collaborative learning and design.

Reflecting on our life experiences in coming together to co-create our partnership, we recognized that we went through the phases of self-knowing, other-knowing, differences-holding, and differences-transcending—albeit unconsciously. In fact, this process has become a way of living and interacting for us, and thereby reaches beyond the formal conceptual and methodological aspects of the SI framework. We usually describe our partnership as a dance, a continuous co-adaptation in syntony with the rhythms of our milieu. Yet, the phases of differentiation, integration, and coordination that we went through while creating our partnership were not explicitly evident to us until recently. As our story made clear earlier on, coming together meant learning intensively about both ourselves and the other simultaneously, as well as

dealing with the obstacles and opportunities that arose from our context. This self-knowing and other-knowing implied learning how our dynamic and complex essence was continuously challenged and transformed by our interactions. Dialogue was critical for such deep and transformative learning. Our love and trust for each other brought us together to the point where we were able to empathize with each other completely. This was our “differences-holding,” and it proved to be a source of strength, growth, and respect as we continued our life-learning journey together. It was when we committed to each other and decided to purposefully co-create a common life and a shared future that we transcended our individual selves in order to arrive at a new level of integration. In fact, we think of ourselves as the kathialexander entity, and sometimes even present ourselves this way! The concept of unity in diversity nicely represents how we think of the kathialexander entity: there is constant recognition and coordination of, and respect for, our individual evolving selves and our integrated mutual self. We seek to bring both our individual uniqueness and our synergic strength to all our future creating orientations and activities.

Does this mean that we are done with our synergic process? Not at all—the co-creative dance of relationship is ongoing. We continue to learn and to change: new opportunities, new contexts, and new people catalyze further transformations. We continue to be engaged in a process of self-knowing, other-knowing, differences-holding, and differences-transcending because we are on a path of becoming, that is, a path of the individual and joint development of our potentials. In this way, we continuously empower ourselves to co-create a better partnership and to shape an evolutionary path.

Our understanding of the relationship between the SI and the learning and design processes is represented in Figure 2, below. The arrows indicate relationships of catalysis: for example, other-knowing catalyzes self-knowing and vice-versa in that other-knowing is like a window to perceive the possibility of different ways of being in the world, while self-knowing is like a mirror to comprehend one’s own values and assumptions. In open and trustful interactions, the tendency is toward differences-holding since a better understanding of similarities and differences enhances ability for further empathy and understanding. The same is true at the next level: our ability to empathize with others and our willingness to learn with and from others tends toward a state of synergic integration that transcends the individuals involved—it is a way of

being in the world that is more than either individual could realize on their own or by mixing their perspectives together. That is why differences-transcending is not a matter of either compromise or simple collaboration. It offers a new way of learning—and becoming—with the world.

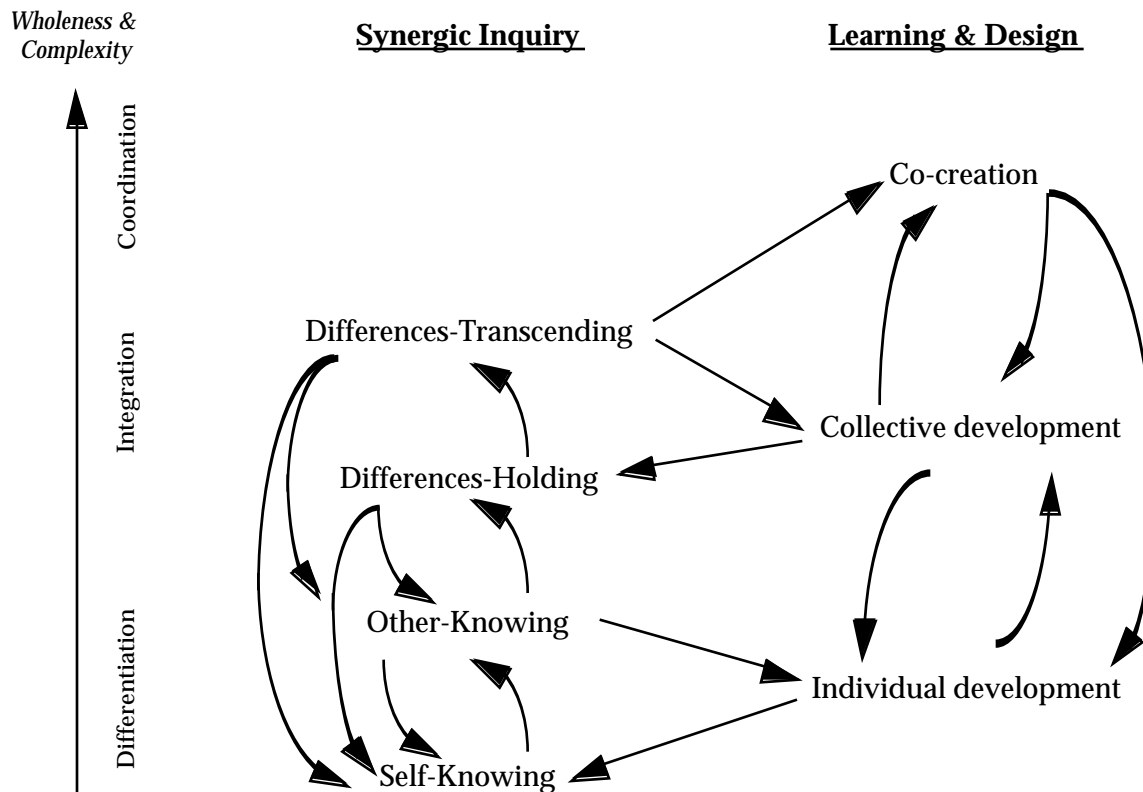


Figure 2. Interrelations between Synergic Inquiry and the process of Learning and Design.

In our experience, a learning orientation is an essential element of SI. The realization of individual potential affects and is affected by both self- and other-knowing. Likewise, collective development occurs when we are not only willing to suspend disbelief of the views and ways of the other, but when we are willing to truly embrace the other and work and learn with them. It is only when we transcend our differences, through collaboration, communication, empathy, and trust—when we are ready to co-create—that we can begin to design new types of relationships, new ways of being and becoming, and new ways of living. To seek the transcendence of our differences and to promote co-creation is a path towards higher complexity and wholeness. It is a syntony quest, that is, is a creative aligning and tuning with the evolutionary processes of which we are a part, and as such, a contribution to the

evolution of consciousness and the creation of new possibilities for the future. This is life-long learning. In face of the planetary challenges of our time, this is our extraordinary common quest.

Designing together

The ideal of an evolutionary learning community is a fuzzy and abstract notion. As yet, it can provide a general though incomplete image of an alternative way of being in the world. Therefore, as we mentioned above, any human activity system interested in becoming an ELC is faced with the challenge of translating this generic image into a concrete vision for themselves. In other words, each community has to create an image of *themselves* as a concrete, authentic, and unique ELC.

In our relationship as partners in life, we have explored the implications of becoming an authentic learning community. “How to walk our talk” has been one of the guiding questions that has led us to engage in the purposeful design of ourselves as an evolutionary learning community. According to the phases of transcendence described in Figure 1, above, we are currently in the design phase.

Our work combines evolutionary systems theory, social systems design methodology, and life-long-learning orientations to individual and group empowerment. We are dedicated to the design of collaborative learning ecologies *with* others. Essentially, we seek to create conditions that empower individuals and groups to develop the skills necessary for the co-creation of sustainable, evolutionary futures. We see ourselves as catalysts of purposeful and creative aligning/tuning with the evolutionary processes of which we are a part; finding and generating meaning and evolutionary opportunity, both individually and collectively. We have taken on a professional identity to match our dedication and are calling our inquiry *Syntony Quest*.

Erich Jantsch considers syntony as “inquiry at the evolutionary level par excellence” (1975, p. 103). He describes this inquiry as the process of cultural organization which “may be helped in an evolutionary sense by furthering cultural differentiation, a pluralism of as many ideas, life styles, and world views as possible. The invention and introduction of new forms of cultural organization ought to become increasingly a matter of conscious design” (Jantsch, 1975, 260).

According to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (1976), syntony can be defined as "in radio, resonance," while 'to syntonyze' is "to tune or harmonize with each other." In this sense, syntony is the process of communication and resonance at the psychic and spiritual levels which, in a subconscious way, has united parts of humankind over certain periods of time. It is our challenge to learn to *consciously* tune in to the general evolutionary forces that shape us as we shape them. As Jantsch puts it, "we shall have to learn now to design systems of syntony" (Jantsch, 1975, p. 270).

As we conceive of it, syntony is a creative aligning and tuning with the evolutionary processes of which we are a part. It involves listening to the rhythms of change and learning how to play our own melody in harmony with the larger piece [as in piece of music, piece of the whole, and *peace*]. It is finding and creating meaning and evolutionary opportunity, both individually and collectively. We envision *Syntony Quest* as a vehicle for the cultural differentiation and purposeful transcendence of social systems through convergent evolutionary pathways.

Does the notion of an evolutionary learning community represent a system of syntony? We believe so. And because we do, we want to explore the implications of becoming a system of syntony—first as partners in life, and then as catalysts for other communities. We hope that our personal efforts serve not only our own learning and development process, but also inspire others to engage in their own syntony quest, designing their interpretation of an ELC in light of a future-sustaining evolutionary ethic.

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