

# WINDS & WAVES

## “Imaginal Education” by any other name...

By Randy Williams

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) has often said of its various methods and processes that they are “life” methods. This means that they are modeled after the way people really experience life. Two conclusions arise from this. One, the ICA does not create or otherwise invent its methods, it discovers them. Second, if these are “life” methods, chances are they exist and can be found elsewhere in other formats used by other organizations.

One such “discovered” method forms the basis for the ICA’s approach to learning, called by the ICA “Imaginal Education.” This suggests that the process is used to enhance and expand the imagination. However it also is indicative of the source from which the process was discovered. In 1956, Kenneth Boulding, an economist and educator, wrote a book entitled *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society*, in which he proposed the four premises upon which Imaginal Education is built. (1) People operate out of images. (2) The images which people hold determine their behaviour. (3) Images are communicated and can therefore be changed. (4) Changed images lead to changed behaviour.

One of ICA’s strategic approaches to its mission is called “contextual re-education,” which means changing the context, that is, shifting our perception of the world that informs our response to and participation in what is going on. This begins to get more to the root of what Imaginal Education is about. It goes further than merely the transfer of knowledge and acquisition of skills, which is frequently how education is perceived. Imaginal Education has to do with a change of heart, mind and will which leads one to adopt new approaches and lifestyles and subsequently to do things differently.

In the US, the ICA was founded as the non-sectarian arm of the Ecumenical Institute, an overtly Christian organization. As such, this concept of learning as a change of heart, mind and will fits very well. In the New Testament, the Greek word *metanoia* is sometimes translated to mean to be “born again.” In a sense this is all the Ecumenical Institute and the Institute of Cultural Affairs have ever been about—providing opportunities for people to have a

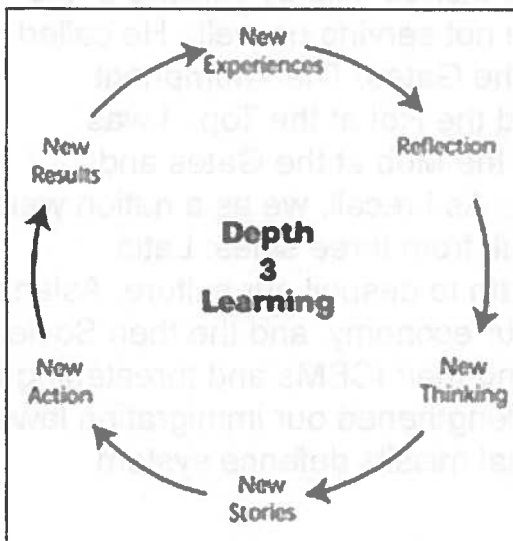
change of heart, mind and will so that they do things differently and thus “bend history.”

I want to share one instance in which I encountered this life method in another institution and format. Sometime in the early 1990s I attended a two-hour seminar presented by Peter Senge, the systems thinker who is director of the Center for Organizational Learning at the MIT Sloan School of Management. I do not remember the title of the seminar that morning, but what I do remember is a process which Senge presented, which he referred to, as I recall, as “Depth 3 Learning.” I no longer have the notes I took that morning and am therefore writing from memory, but my memory of this event and the process presented is vivid. No doubt over the years as I’ve interpreted and expounded upon what I heard that morning, I’ve put my own twist on what I remember Senge to have said, and I have actually consciously added a couple of steps to the Depth 3 Learning Cycle as he presented it, but certainly without distorting his original meaning and intent.

For a bit of context, many will remember Senge’s best-selling book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, first published in 1990 with a second edition in 2006. One of his five disciplines is “Mental Models” which he defines as “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action.” (*The Fifth Discipline*, page 8) This of course immediately calls to mind Boulding’s “images” and hence ICA’s “imaginal education.” Senge continues by explaining that “working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny.”

One last comment about Senge before I get to his Depth 3 Learning Cycle - when he founded the Society for Organization Learning he defined learning organizations as “organizations where people continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.” (*The Fifth Discipline*, page 4) He emphasizes that organizations as such do not learn, but the people in them do. However, he also stipulates that learning is best done in teams where everyone is a teacher and everyone a learner.

In the presentation I attended, Senge used the phrase “stories of reality” to connote exactly the same thing he means by “mental models.” His presentation of the Depth 3 Learning Cycle and the conversation that followed caused me to immediately see the parallel to the process of “imaginal education” I had learnt years earlier from the ICA.



I have already confessed that the graphic represents my adaptation of Senge's presentation in that I have added "New Action" and "New Results," which he did not include. Also, since the notes I took that morning have long since vanished, I cannot vouch that I am using Senge's exact words, but I am close enough that his meaning is intact. Here is the gist of the presentation that morning, with my own reflections and stories added.

### **New Experience**

Every learning opportunity begins with a practical experience, a happening that may be extraordinary or it may be very "every day," but it is new in that it never happened before exactly this way, in this context. It is an objective occurrence that just "happened" and anyone who was there could have experienced it.

### **Reflection**

To capitalize upon the potential for learning which the new experience presents requires reflection, by which the meaning held within the experience can be discovered. One of my graduate school professors had a very simple "three questions" in his reflective process which he abbreviated with three short words, "what, so what, and now what." What happened, what does it mean, and what are the implications for the future? Those who are familiar with the ICA's structured conversation format referred to as ORID, for Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional, will recognize the similarity. Senge did not specify what he meant by reflection, but in other places he refers to "dialogue," citing the process developed by physicist David Bohm for group reflection, which is often called conversation for the sake of learning.

### **New Thinking**

Senge stipulates that through reflection we may begin to call into question some of our most cherished assumptions about how we see that life is and how the world works, and we may begin to formulate new assumptions which become the basis for a deep transformation of our core understanding, emotional response and courage to act.

### **New Stories of Reality**

Thinking new thoughts can lead to the creation of a whole new way of seeing the world, which Senge called "new stories of reality." The power of the stories we tell ourselves about the reality we live in and are a part of is unmistakable. In the 1985 book by Robert Reich entitled *Tales of a New*

*America*, the author outlined four prevalent stories held by citizens of the USA at that time which he suggested were not serving us well. He called them respectively the Tale of The Mob at the Gates, The Triumphant Individual, The Benevolent Community and the Rot at the Top. I was particularly caught by the first, The Tale of the Mob at the Gates and remember how that played out at the time. As I recall, we as a nation were telling ourselves that we were under assault from three sides: Latin Americans were coming at us from the south to despoil our culture, Asians were moving in from the East to capture our economy, and the then Soviets were a political threat from the West, waving their ICBMs and threatening to physically annihilate us. As a result we strengthened our immigration laws, enacted trade embargos and built a national missile defence system popularly called Star Wars.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, three significant global events occurring in the 60s and 70s reshaped our global story about the relationship of human beings to the natural environment and launched the environmental movement. The first was the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, in which she raised our awareness of the harmful effects that pesticides were having upon the air we breathe. The immediate result was the passage of laws in the US banning the use of DDT. On Christmas Eve of 1968, US astronauts orbiting the Moon on board Apollo 8 beamed back photos of planet Earth from outer space, showing for the first time the "Earthrise" of this blue marble upon which we all live and depend for life, which Buckminster Fuller and others would come to refer to as "Spaceship Earth." This metaphor alone is one of the most powerful "new stories" of modern times. And finally, in 1972 a team headed by Donella Meadows, writing for the Club of Rome, published the book *Limits to Growth*, which for the first time called into question the story of unlimited resources and perpetual material and economic growth for the planet. The story of reality that emerged from these three events goes something like this, that we all live together on a finite planet where we depend upon the same systems and resources to sustain our lives, which resources are finite and limited, and which may be defiled and destroyed by own actions. The impact of this new story of reality is being acted out as a global movement to care for the planet and all its inhabitants has emerged and is growing daily. Environmental activist Paul Hawken has called it "the largest movement in the world".

### **New Actions and New Results**

As mentioned earlier, although Senge did not include these two steps in his presentation, for my purposes I have added these last two phases of the cycle - that New Stories of Reality lead to New Actions which achieve New Results. The oft-quoted truism, that the height of insanity is to continue to do the same thing we've always done and expect to get different results, is

relevant here. The proof of the pudding that learning has indeed occurred, that new stories have been embedded in our conscious awareness to give us a whole new perspective, is that we in fact approach things differently and engage in new actions that achieve different results. The new results give rise to new experiences, and so the cycle goes round and round. We see how learning may be continuous, and that a change of mind, heart and will need not be something that occurs only once in a lifetime but can be always in process, preparing the learner to be transformed again and again.

Senge had two admonitions as he concluded his presentation that morning. One was that the most often ignored or truncated step of this process is Reflection, and that without it learning never occurs. Much of his work up to and since that time has been to encourage and facilitate reflection and dialogue as a prerequisite to learning in our communities and organizations. Finally, and I think I remember his words almost precisely, Senge explained: "Please remember, our stories about reality are stories **about** reality. **They are not reality !** This punctuation was to say that reality will continue to be as elusive as ever and our stories will at best always be but part of the whole story. Therefore to continue to learn we must always be open to the next experience of emergent reality so that we may reflect upon our experience, think new thoughts, and once again tell the transforming new story that will lead again to a change of mind, heart and will.

Since 1969 I have been at one time or another an ICA staff member, constituent and colleague and am currently a member of the ICA-USA board of directors. As such I confess to some degree of pride and a great deal of reassurance to discover that "Imaginal Education," our approach to learning, is indeed a "life" method that has been and is being proliferated around the globe by a variety of entities in a multiplicity of formats. I am grateful that, thanks to Boulding and others, we discovered it and that it continues to serve us well.

