

Analysis of the implementation of WDU Amazon Rain forest Initiative

Mariana I. Vergara

2011

Teachers College, Columbia University

Introduction

This project aims to use organization theory as method approach to the task of how to build, nurture, manage and sustain change at the Nationality Kichwa of Rio Blanco Napo-Orellana (NKRBNNO community). Currently, corporate America uses organization theory to build effective corporations in making profit, why not use the same techniques to build effective communities in preserving the Amazon rain forest?

This paper will outline some of the dynamism technology and responsive organizational dynamism occurrence at the implementation of the WDU Amazon project as an initiative of the World Dignity University (WDU). I will describe the implementation of this project from an organization theory lens as we use IT as a vehicle to achieve this implementation.

When we think about organization theory, we think about global corporations, such as, mining companies. Mining companies are intruding (legally and illegally) into the Amazon rain forest. Mining companies use an organization theory called transaction cost economizing approach. Transaction cost economizing approach (TCE) has played a constructive role in pushing ahead the frontiers of organization theory (Aldrich, 2001). However, its critics point out that TCE draws on an under-socialized conception of human because individuals are presumed to behave individualistically, as isolated actors. Under-socialized people act without regard to the social damage they do, or the impressions they leave with others. Thus, TCE theorists stress materialistic or self-serving motives, as Aldrich (2001) states about Loasby's description of TCE; TCE "follows the standard American practice in constructing self-interest as narrowly focused selfishness". Thus, this approach promotes humiliation and understates the importance of social exchange: reciprocity, cooperative, and trust.

On other hand, the core philosophy of WDU is reciprocity, cooperative and trust. WDU is a community of practice. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2008). Langer states that a community of practice is very much a social learning as oppose to one that is based solely on the individual (Langer, 2005).

The WDU Amazon project is the creation of a belt of WDU sites or branches around the Amazon rain forest. The two main aims for our WDU Amazon belt: "the Amazon as a university for the world": First, the indigenous population will invite WDU associates from all over the world to learn everything about how sustainable livelihood has traditionally been achieved in the rain forest. Sustainable livelihood, rather than jobs, is what the world needs to learn more about in the future. The world population is in need to learn and accept help from the indigenous population, rather than the other way round. The indigenous population should not just learn English, etc., but be enabled to become WDU professors of Sustainability Studies. Second, WDU associates from all over the world, through their presence, give protection to the Amazon rain forest and its population.

Core Philosophy

I am a core member of the global team at the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) Network. This organization has evolved to create the World Dignity University (WDU). At the HumanDHS network, we are a global transdisciplinary network and fellowship of concerned academics and practitioners. We wish to stimulate systemic change, globally and locally, to open space for equality in dignity and mutual respect and esteem to take root and grow, thus ending humiliating practices and breaking cycles of humiliation throughout the world.

We suggest that a frame of cooperation and shared humility is necessary - not a mindset of humiliation - if we wish to build a better world, a world of equal dignity for all. We are currently around 1,000 personally invited members, more than 2,000 more people support our work, and our website is being accessed by around 40,000 people from more than 180 countries per year (Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network, 2011).

A Practical and Engaged Research Approach

I am working with members of the board of directors at the WDU in order to establish a WDU branch in the Amazon rainforest. Our problem is that we are not a “physical” institution; we are a “virtual” institution. However, to be a “virtual” community helps us to work in a more community-based process, instead of an event-driven individual learning. As Langer (2005) describes it, I believe that we are community IT of practice because we allow for the continuous evolution of learning based on emergent strategies. These strategies are creative approaches to pro-active actions. The relationship between a community of practice and IT are significant because it helps us to deal with the evolutionary aspects of Technological Dynamism.

IT in the organizational context at the WDU plays a big impact on our organizational structure, in our pro-active strategies, the ways in which it can be evaluated, and therefore to the extent in which the leaders of the WDU need to manage IT effectively because we are a virtual organization.

Currently, WDU has one of its members, myself, Mariana Vergara, working in the Ecuadorian rain forest with the Kichwa community of Rio Blanco. The first phase of this project was done in July 2009 when we participated with the Kichwa community in action reflection collaborative inquiry. At that time, the community was exploring alternative ways to become

financially stable by doing community eco-tourism. After the intervention, by July 2010, this community has removed four illegal mining companies from its territories without violence and has built a road that provides access to their community. Now, as part of the second phase of this project we are in action reflection collaborative inquiry with few board members (management team) of the WDU. Our long-term plan is to create a belt of WDU branches around the Amazon rainforest. We would like to begin with a WDU pilot project in Rio Blanco with the Kichwa community. Currently, we are in conversations with universities to bring students to Rio Blanco to learn about the Amazon rain forest and observe the consequences of globalization in these communities.

It is in the interest of global society not only to protect the rainforest and its biodiversity, but also to learn from the cultural diversity of its indigenous population. Particularly the notion of sustainable livelihoods is important. The long-term aim is therefore to invite WDU associates from all over the world to come to the WDU Amazon belt, and to learn from the indigenous communities. To do this, the indigenous community has to be enabled to act as a resource community for global learning about social and ecological sustainability.

One of the board members of the WDU is the IT person. Ulrich Spalhoff arranges the video conferences through FM. The FlashMeeting (FM) project research gives insights into how live video conferencing can be used in novel ways, supporting online communities and creating new reusable learning objects. FM is a research project from the Open University. FM has been used over four years by a great variety of communities of learners and knowledge workers across the globe. This project research investigates how FM is used to foster online communities, how

to search and browse FM replays and use them as objects to learn and a number of other themes (FM EA-TEL, 2011).

The founder of WDU is Evelin Lindner, and Linda Hartling is the director and they recruited Mariana and Uli to support the mission of WDU. WDU wants to invite people to transcend the discourse of jobs for profit maximization into jobs in a sustainable dignified world. The method to achieve this would be dialogue, in the co-creation of a systemic action research through action reflective collaborative inquiry, to create the WDU Amazon as university for the world to come and learn gives more dignity to all.

Organizational Learning

Essentially, the organizational learning theory has transported the idea of individual learning to the organizational level (Probst, Buchel, and Raub, 1998). However, they state that Weick and Westley raised the issue of whether the literature on organizational learning is really about an organizational level phenomenon, or simply about individuals learning within organizations. They argued that some theorists have ignored the issue by simply treating organizational learning as learning by individuals within an organization context, but what about the individuals' context? These individuals have mental models that shape the organization; they evaluate their work which is shaped by their ways of seeing and understanding themselves in context.

At WDU, regarding individuals' context, we are individuals with different cultural background and ethnicity with different life experiences. Due to these experiences, their process of self-development resulted in that this management team has an autonomy abstract leadership and they are interconnected. As an example of these multiple experiences, we had a wonderful

workshop at Teachers College. It was titled: 2010 Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict which represented the Sixteenth Annual HumanDHS Conference. At this conference there were many presentations regarding humiliation around the world. The presentation that impacted me the most was the work of poetry and videos from Palestinian youth on how they perceive the Gaza conflict. Moreover, the fact that the person who gathered all this information was Jew and how she described the reaction of other Jews to her work was shocking. I live in the United States and I am exposed to the version of this conflict from the media which support the Israeli invasion of Palestinian territories. It was very surprising for me to see this conflict from a different perspective. I could say that the humiliation experience of these children is invisible for us, Americans. Another presentation was the humiliation experience of children who are born with HIV and how they feel as they grow up into adults. We got together at this conference to reflect as part of a conscientization process after witnessing all forms of humiliation around the world.

This concept of conscientization, which is at the heart of Paulo Freire's theory pedagogy of liberation (Freire, 1970); connotes both consciousness and conscience and thus captures the cognitive and normative processes that constitute this form of reflective knowledge. In our interactions, we emphasize the learning process, such as single-loop learning, double-loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978) and triple loop learning (Torbert, 2004) with different focus on behavioral and cognitive change. At WDU, we are trying to address very difficult problems, problems related with "humiliation". Therefore, we cannot stay on the single-loop learning, we must reflect and move to the double-loop and triple-loop learning where we are addressing why and how to change our organization in order to be effective. In the development of organizational learning is mediated through multiples levels. At the individual level,

interpretation of the environment leads to the revision of individual knowledge structures (Walsh, 1995). At the group level, individual knowledge structures are synthesized to create shared beliefs. At the organization level, the routinization of shared beliefs leads to organizational knowledge and transform individual experience into group knowledge. Transforming individual knowledge into organizational routines leads to complex and embodied knowledge. Organizational learning contributes to the strategy perspective by conceiving the organization as a dynamic, integrated system that constantly changes (Aldrich, 2001).

In the description of my work, by using IT through FM, WDU leaders around the world meet (from Norway, Germany, Oregon and New York) in order to work in the WDU Amazon project. The FM system records the meeting, provides minutes and its log chatting. In this way, we have concrete tools to evaluate our social interaction because it is through social interactions between individuals that knowledge is synthesized. As Wiley states, ‘intersubjectivity is emergent upon the interchange and synthesis of two, or more, communicating selves’ (1998:258). The interaction creates agreements in a communication process and thereby leads to shared beliefs. As David Teece (2001) states “knowledge is not primarily about facts and what we refer to as ‘content’; rather, it is more about ‘context’”. The combination of IT and co-aligned organizational processes can significantly enhance learning and competitive advantage. Once knowledge is made explicit, it is more innovative and productive. Organizational learning builds on the idea that individual learning is not sufficient for organizations to be successful, organizational learning proposes that organizations need to be able to transform and distribute individual knowledge (Kim, 1993) and acquire new knowledge (MacDonald, 1995) in order to create a whole which is more than the sum of its parts.

We as an organization must learn to act quickly, like Bill Gates' response at Microsoft in 1995 once he figured out the significance of the internet. This ability to sense and then seize opportunities is, in part, an organizational capability that has been referred to as a "dynamic capability" (Teece, 1998, Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997, and Teece and Pisano, 1994). We must work in recognize the paradigm shift and then respond appropriately.

Langer states (2005) that it appears that as organization learning matures within Responsive Organizational Dynamism (ROD) and there is an increasing need to educate the management team. ROD addresses both individual and organizational learning. At the individual level, individuals do not move equally from stage to stage within the dimensions of learning. However, in our case, I found that the management team has an autonomy abstract leadership and they are interconnected. This is a very rear characteristic. Within their adult development, they moved beyond the acceptance point to an integrated disposition and have stable operations. Now, we are utilizing the different phases of the learning process to further mature our organization's ability to integrate technology strategically and culturally. We (the management team and I) are working at an organizational learning level with the purpose to make our work sustainable. Looking at the individual self-development level in the scope of organizational learning and management techniques provides us an important method for later development in system thinking and becoming sustainable (with a gradual transformation process).

Langer (2005) compares ROD to another historical concept called "Self-Generating Organizations". Self-Generating Organizations are known for their promotion of autonomy with an "underlying organic sense of interdependence" (Johansen et al., 1995). Based on this

definition, a self-generating organization is like an organism that evolves over time. However, ROD provides a hybrid model that allows for self-generating infrastructures while providing certain levels of control fostered by organizational learning.

Peter Senge's work (1990) in the Fifth Discipline points out our attention to the U process. The U process (2009) was developed by Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Adam Kahane, and many of their colleagues as a way to design and lead deep collective learning processes. This process can provide a framework for organizing how the five disciplines (system thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning) are used in time: 1) sensing: deep inquiry into their mental models through seeing reality beyond their filters; 2) presencing: moving from there to a deep process of connecting with purpose and visioning, individually and collectively; and 3) realizing: then moving into rapid prototyping to translate visions into concrete working models from which feedback can be garnered and further adjustments made. Thus, as Langer (2005) points out, organizations evolve over time.

We are not an "event-driven learning" organization. We work especially concerned suspending established mental models and engaging in a process of collective inquiry based on directly experiencing the system, as well as dialogue involving many points of view regarding reality. The method I suggested to WDU is action reflection collaborative inquiry; this type of collaborative action inquiry is co-inquiry, most concisely defined as doing research "with" people, rather than "on" them (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; Heron, 1996; Reason, 1988). Critical reflection promotes understanding that goes beyond both 'the individual' and 'the problem'; and it has the following characteristics (Reynolds, 1998): a) it is concerned with

questioning assumptions, b) its focus is the social rather than the individual, c) it pays particular attention to the analysis of power relations, and, d) it is concerned with democracy.

This is a participatory action research initiative, Park (1998) states that “in participatory action research people who share problems in common decide what problems to tackle and directly get involved in research and social change activities”.

This approach of action reflection collaborative inquiry is conducive to the outcomes we are working for; dignity for all. We want the Kichwa community to go through emancipatory learning as a way to co-create a sustainable way to preserve the Amazon rain forest. The reason for this emphasis on popular participation is that participatory research is not just a convenient instrument for solving social problems through technically efficacious means, but it is also a social practice that helps marginalized people attain a degree of emancipation as autonomous and responsible members of society (Freire, 1982). It is allied to the ideals of democracy, and in that spirit it is proper to call it research of the people, by the people, and for the people (Park, 1997).

Conclusion

This is an emergent process, what we are trying to do, does not exist. Currently indigenous communities in the rain forest are experiencing the forces of globalization by the intrusion of mining, logging, and oil companies in their territories. Transnational companies go into the Amazon rain forest and take its resources, and destroying the livelihood of these indigenous communities. This process has happened before around the world. Now, we have to use this same system (globalization) regarding organization theory to preserve the Amazon rain forest.

In order to deal with the mental demands of modern life, adults thinking needs to continue to evolve through higher level of consciousness. All of us (indigenous, scholars, practitioners, local eco-tourism communities, corporations, NGOs and local government agencies) co-creating a sustainable way to preserve the Amazon rain forest with the main goal of building this belt with branches of the WDU around the Amazon. The task at this participatory action research is to bring together all relevant participants or stakeholders through inclusive processes of ‘organic’ or naturalistic recruitment’ (Wadsworth, 2008). These meetings of action reflection collaborative inquiry provide with the opportunity to use ecological, hermeneutical, or ‘big picture’ systems thinking to assist us to see the challenges we are facing and through action reflection collaborative inquiry enable us to draw the best ‘theoretical ’maps’ by which we could navigate until better ones were found.

Currently, the Kichwa community does not have a consistent flow of customers for their community tourism, thus keeping them in subsistence-level poverty. On the other hand, college students do not have real life experience with the Amazon rainforest. By bringing college students to the Kichwa ecotourism initiative, visitors will pay \$50 per day. This fee includes lodging, three meals and a guided visit to local attractions like “La Cueva de la Anaconda”, or go to see “Samay Yura”, a huge beautiful tree. In time, Kichwa residents may buy from the students, perhaps access to markets in “fair-trade-type” agreements, or technical expertise.

The value-add for the indigenous Kichwua community is to co-create a sustainable community that matches or surpasses salaries obtainable from working on destructive resource-depleting business workflows, such as clear-cutting the landscape, strip-mining or farming in ways that dramatically reduce topsoil. The WDU Amazon rain forest initiative aims to build

upon and strengthen the Kichwa community's pre-existing skills and resources, and provides tools to strengthen their sustainable forest management skills, e.g., via ecotourism and inventory management. Furthermore, college students, via a real-life environmental experience, practice building relationships, trade and new ways of conducting business, centered on new business and research methodologies.

After the intervention in 2009, this Kichwua community was able to become a development agent and look for the resources needed to build this road and to date the community has removed four illegal mining companies from its territories without violence. To build the road, they contacted the local government agencies, and requested the heavy machinery they needed. Later, they collaborated with the hand labor to cut the necessary logs for the road. They did this in the form of "mingas" where all the members of the community work together and achieve a purpose. In this case, these indigenous worked together to build the road which it is an action that invariably entail modifying or going against existing social arrangements that actors perceive to be at the top of their problems. In dealing with the social forces that stand in the way of change in such ways, in the process these indigenous came to feel the power they gain by engaging in actions as autonomous agents. Through action we learn how the world works, what we can do, and who we are; this is how we become aware and emancipated.

References

- Aldrich, H. (2001). *Organizations evolving*. London: Sage Publications.
- Argyris, C. & Schon, D. A. (1996). *Organizational learning II: theory, method, and practice*.
Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Bray, J., Lee, J., & Yorks, L. (2000). *Collaborative inquiry in practice: Action, reflection, and making meaning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- FM EA-TEL, 2011. Retrieved from <http://fm.ea-tel.eu/research/index.html>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Plenum
- Freire, P. (1982). Creating alternative research methods. Learning to do it by doing it. In B. Hall, A. Gillette and R. Tandon (eds). *Creating knowledge: A monopoly?* New Delhi: Participatory Research in Asia, pp. 29-37.
- Heron, J. (1996). *Cooperative inquiry: Research into the human condition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heron, J. & Reason, P. (1997). A participatory inquiry paradigm. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, 274-294.
- Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.humiliationstudies.org/>

Johansen, R., Saveri, A., & Schmid, G. (1995). Forces for organizational change: 21st century organizations: Reconciling control and empowerment. *Institute for the future*, 6(1), 1-9.

Kim, D. H. (1993). The link between individual and organizational learning. *Sloan Management Review*, 35: 37-50.

Langer, A. M. (2005). IT and organizational learning. New York, NY: Routledge.

MacDonald, S. (1995). Learning to change: An information perspective on learning in the organization. *Organization Science*, 6: 557-68.

Park, P. (1997). Participatory research, democracy, and community. *Practicing Anthropology*, 19 (3):8-13.

Park, P. (1999). People knowledge, and change in participatory research. *Management learning*, 30 (2):140-57.

Probst, G., Buchel, B., and Raub, S. (1998). Knowledge as a strategic resource. In G. V. Krough, J. Roos, and D. Kleine (eds.) *Knowing in firms: Understanding, managing and measuring knowledge*, 2140-252. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Reason, P. (1988). Introduction. In P. Reason (Ed.), *Human inquiry in action: Developments in new paradigm research*. (pp. 1-17). London: Sage

Reynolds, M. (1998). Reflection and critical reflection in management learning. *Management*

Learning 29(2): 183-200.

Scharmer, O. C. (2009). *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges, the social technology of presencing*. San Francisco, CA: Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday Publications

Teece, D. J. (1998). Capturing value from knowledge assets: The new economy, markers for know-how, and intangible assets. *California Management Review*, 40 (3): 55-79.

Teece, D. J., and Pisano, G. (1994). The dynamic capabilities of firms: an introduction. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 3:3.

Teece, D., Pisano, G., and Shuen, A. (1997). Dynamic capabilities and strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 18 (7): 509-33.

Teece, D. J. (2001). Strategies for managing knowledge assets: The role of firm structure and industrial context. In I. Nonaka and D. Teece (eds.) *Managing Industrial Knowledge: Creation, Transfer and Utilization*, 123-144. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Torbert, B, Associates (2004). *Action inquiry: The power of transformative leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Berret-Koehler.

Vince, R. (1996). *Managing change: Reflections on Equality and Management Learning*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

Walsh, J. P. (1995). Managerial and organizational cognition: Notes from a trip down memory

lane. *Organization Science*, 6:280-321.

Wadsworth, Y. (2008). *The mirror, the magnifying glass, the compass and the map: Facilitating*

Participatory action research. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury,(Eds.). *Handbook of action*

research: The concise paperback edition (pp.322-334). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wenger, E. (2008). *Communities of practice, learning, meaning, and identity. Learning in doing:*

social, cognitive, and computational perspectives. New York, NY: Cambridge University

Press.

Wiley, N. (1998). The micro-macro problem in social theory. *Sociological Theory*, 6:254-61.

Yorks, L. (2005). Adult learning and the generation of new knowledge and meaning: Creating

liberating spaces for fostering adult learning through practitioner based collaborative

action inquiry. *Teachers College Record*, volume 107, number 6, pp. 1217-1244.