

Connecting Our Conversations | Becoming Wiser Together

by George Pór



George Pór, PrimaVera Research Fellow in Collective Intelligence at Universiteit van Amsterdam.

Wisdom Society or Extinct Society

Connecting our conversations is the best way to discover that the future is already here, but the awareness of it is not evenly distributed. Why is this important? Because, the choice we have is between joining together to create a wisdom society or regressing into an extinct society. The complex, intertwining local and global crises will outpace our ‘response-ability’ if we don’t wise up individually and collectively.

A human group or social system is wiser if it can think and act from a broader perspective and care for a larger whole with all of its parts. Without this expanded perspective and care our minds are caught in a maze of linear causalities, and thus we are incapable of making sense of the intricate patterns of the looming, extinction-level dangers and the corresponding evolutionary opportunities for transformation.

How can we sense the essence of an historical possibility while still waiting for our wise actions to be realized? Try this: imagine our grandchildren could live in a world where the full blossoming of their

individual and collective talents and creativity is at the center of society’s attention.

How would that be different from today’s world? It would probably have wiser ways to organize work and commerce, governance, education, all social institutions, and their relationship with the built and natural environment.

If that is a future we feel attracted to, where do we start the presencing of it? The answer is in our own actions and commitments; to learn from our experience both as individuals and as organizations, as well as from ‘the future in need of us’ (Otto Scharmer).

We can start by opening all our senses in order to observe how the future is already here. We can identify the signs by which it manifests. The intergenerational movement is a good example of such a sign. The following story is about my learning as a participant in a bigger story told on pp. 32 – 33 of this issue of *Kosmos*.

Intergenerational Pioneers Connect Local and Global Conversations

At a recent party in my home office we listened to snippets of a recorded chat on Skype, a service that provides free text, audio, and video-conferencing, worldwide via the Web. The chat had taken place a week before the party in the context of a series of intergenerational conference calls.

The idea for the series was conceived in an email distribution list where older and younger generations met and explored thoughts and personal experiences related to connecting across the generational divide. There are many such conversations taking place in physical and virtual spaces. What distinguished this one was that it was triggered by a group exchange via email about how to celebrate the 10th birthday of Pioneers of Change (<http://pioneersofchange.net>). At the

heart of the explorations are questions related to what pioneering means to the younger ones and to those who have been doing it since the 60s.

In the particular Skype conversation from which we were listening to recorded excerpts there were only two participants—a young friend in Boston and me in Brussels. I was struck by the beauty and power of her longing for a world that wouldn’t respond with undervaluing attitudes and cynicism to her playfulness, joy and authenticity. With her permission I included her words in my selection of excerpts that I introduced at the dinner party.

My colleagues (ranging from their 20s to 50s) marked those snippets on the playlist that particularly touched them and I fed the highlights of the conversation in Brussels back to the global conference calls. That’s how one conversation with a circle of participants can inspire another. This ecology of conversations keeps growing. It’s happening spontaneously and with intention and, I may also add, with velocity and profound connectivity.

This story is an encouragement also for prototyping the much needed multi-dimensional connections between *local* and *global* conversations and energies across generations; conversations that strive to not only talk about but also embody change and transformation. There is more about the dynamics of the local and global layers of collective intelligence (CI) in my blog http://www.community-intelligence.com/blogs/public/2005/06/a_localtoglobal_definition_of.html.

What Is Collective Intelligence?

As the CI meme is spreading fast online and off-line, so is the range of significance associated with it. For some, it is the ‘wisdom of crowds,’ for others it is the inter-subjective field

of energy that comes into being when people interact from a position beyond ego—to name two of the popular branches of CI. Each of them can be thought of as a particular lens or context through which different meanings of CI can be accessed and can enhance each other. In this article, we introduce CI in the following three contexts: evolutionary, cognitive, and economic. Change agents can power up their impact by using them together.

CI through the evolutionary lens. My late friend, Finn Voldtofte, described CI as, “The capability of a collective/social system to hold questions and language too complex for any individual intelligence to hold, and to work out strategies, visions, goals, and images of a desired future.”

My own sense of CI grew from examining its role in the unfolding of subsequent chapters in human history. Seen through this historical lens, CI is the capacity of human groups and systems to evolve towards higher order complexity and harmony.

Voldtofte’s and my definitions of CI are complementary and certainly not value neutral; they imply directionality and historical concreteness. The level of CI reached by a collective entity is defined by the ensemble of knowledge and tools available to it in any stage of its evolution.

Seen through the evolutionary lens, CI is always associated with a specific human group or social system and can be enhanced and taken to a new level through collective practices.

In the jump time of history, when the old systems are in crisis and the new ones have not yet developed on a large scale, CI can do its job only if it is guided by collective wisdom. In such times discovering and engaging the path forward calls for the broader perspective of caring for evolution itself. Practices for the evolution of consciousness and social systems urgently need to be co-created and co-invented. Only then shall we be able to reduce the fear, resistance and suffering that are currently accompanying the transition to the new civilization.

CI through the cognitive lens. Pierre Lévy, Canada Research Chair on CI at the

University of Ottawa, wrote, “Intelligence refers to the main cognitive powers: perception, action planning and coordination, memory, imagination and hypothesis generation, inquisitiveness and learning abilities. The expression ‘collective intelligence’ designates the cognitive powers of a group.”

The emphasis on CI’s cognitive dimension is strong in the work of Professor Lévy but he also acknowledges, “[E]mphasis on cognition does not intend to diminish the essential roles of emotions, bodies, medias, sign systems, social relations, technologies, biological environment or physical support in collective intelligence processes. The study of collective intelligence constitutes an interdisciplinary aspiring as much to a dialogue between human and social sciences as with the technical, artistic and spiritual traditions.”

Clearly, the potential of such a dialogue cannot be overestimated. All the wisdom traditions value community and communal intelligence. Their confluence with the modern arts and sciences of CI will guide our learning journey to the next level of human possibility, the next stage of our societal evolution.

CI through the ‘political economy’ lens. What was ‘collective intelligence’ in the evolutionary and cognitive contexts becomes ‘general intellect’ in the language of political economy. This term refers to the productive force of the social mind that has been evolving throughout the millennia. All of humankind’s technical and scientific knowledge is part of it.

According to Adam Arvidsson, Michel Bauwens, Antonio Negri and other contemporary philosophers, the general intellect as a productive force includes also the affective qualities at play in the social organization of work and learning. Trust is one of them and more and more indispensable as the social glue that enables social networks, even transactions on eBay.

Not only that, but the low level of trust among members of a collective entity, and with their external stakeholders, can and does hinder organizational effectiveness in business and government. It also means that low-trust ways of organizing limit the development of CI and as a consequence perform

relatively poorly when compared with new, higher-trust ways.

Why we need Collective Intelligence The Crisis of Meaning-Making

What good is it to have a solution to a problem if the parts of that solution are scattered in the knowledge, faculties, and experiences of a large number of players with no way to integrate them? In that question lies a shorthand summary of today’s epistemological crisis. It is not simply one of our numerous global crises, but *the* horizontal crisis that cuts across many of the others and causes their deepening.

CI is as old as humankind itself. What is new is that CI has now moved into the center of economic and social value creation. Thus, any barrier to its evolution becomes a barrier to the development of humankind’s creative potential.

One of those barriers is the system of our collective meaning-making inherited from the industrial era. It’s not that *information* and *knowledge* are growing too fast; the challenge is in an inadequate, outdated ‘mode of the social organization of *meaning*’ (Adam Arvidsson).

In the past, command-and-control structures were adequate to run large systems and define their meaning and purpose. Then the pace of change was much lower. Times of exponential expansion of knowledge and complexity call for new, more capable modes of coordination.

Wiser Communities of Practice, Wiser Organizations

“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better” (Etienne Wenger).

Communities of practice depend for their survival, primarily, on the value that the membership’s combined action continually delivers to members. Thus they are more trust-intensive forms of organizing collaboration than the ones based on wage slavery or more ancient forms of coercion.

Researchers at IBM discovered, “As organizations grow in size, geographical scope, and

complexity, it is increasingly apparent that sponsorship and support of communities of practice—groups whose members regularly engage in sharing and learning, based on common interests—can improve organizational performance.”

In one of its studies the American Productivity and Quality Center predicted, “Communities of practice are the next step in the evolution of the modern, knowledge-based organization.” That step coincides with the shift from the mechanical ‘knowledge management’ view of knowledge to an organic ‘knowledge ecology’ view in which both knowledge and CI are perceived as properties of human communities.

Successfully cultivating CI and a self-organizing community knowledge ecosystem that supports it, calls for the broader perspective associated with wisdom. When organizations and their communities of practice are imbued with this perspective they can pass the chasm that separates the formal and informal organization by honoring and synergizing what each of them does best.

The wisdom of human groups and social systems lies in their ability to add value to their stakeholders as well as to the continuous improvement of their members’ quality of life. The broader the access that members have to the meaning-making activities of the organization, the better are its chances to increase its systemic wisdom.

Communities of practices are social life forms of increasing popularity because the best of them skillfully combine individual and collective capability development with community-enabled organizational results. As the communities mature they become learning partners of the formal structure. One can observe that process in the life of economic actors such as Procter & Gamble and Nokia, or government agencies such as the European Commission, or certain branches of the U.S. federal government.

Wiser communities of practice strengthen the nervous system (the network of connected conversations) of the organizations hosting them. They can also draw on the



An InterGenerational conversation at Meditation Mount, Ojai, California

intelligence of the wider networks of their profession outside the organizational boundaries. Locally and globally connected communities both enhance one another and benefit from the dynamic interplay between local and global scales of CI. As an alternative to top-down globalization, these connections can enrich our lives and support us in the great work of healing dysfunctional local and global systems.

The wisdom society—with which we started this article—can be reached only through the ‘wisening’ of all institutions and systems that frame our lives. Personal, organizational, and global transformation is no longer separable.

The future is in need of the wise action of ‘protoporos’ communities today. The Greek word ‘protoporos’ means ‘the ones who take the journey first’ as I learned from Sarah Whiteley in one of the intergenerational email groups. In the midst of the bad news of the day it is heartening to know that there are more and more protoporos on the journey of unconditional authenticity and commitment to our highest collective aspirations.

Yet, as Barbara Marx Hubbard put it, “The awakening of our species and our search for solutions is occurring, but it’s scattered, and it’s certainly not in dominion anywhere. The larger social structures are proving to be inadequate to solve the problems they’re creating. New social innovations are emerging everywhere, but they are not sufficiently connected or empowered. So right now, any effort that we can make to connect and create greater synergy and participation in

this awakening process is probably the most important thing we can do.”

Connecting our conversations that matter across generations, social sectors, cultures, scientific, artistic, and spiritual disciplines is more urgent than ever. Only this can liberate the collective energy, intelligence and wisdom needed to pass our evolutionary test. It is an epochal challenge, and to meet it we need all the help we can get from the social technologies that facilitate transformation, such as Presencing, Art of Hosting, World Café, Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry—just to name a few.

Can you imagine what will happen when our capacity to free the human mind and heart will co-arise with a passionate search for a better world by the protoporos, and the power of conscious evolutionary media is supported by the next generation of web tools for collective intelligence?

Let’s follow the advice of the Czech poet Rainer Maria Rilke from a century ago. “*Live that question now, and we will live our way into the answer.*”

George Pór is a strategic learning partner and adviser to leaders in international business, government and NGOs in matters of innovation and communities of practice. He served as Senior Research Fellow at INSEAD, and as Research Fellow in the Complexity Research Group at London School of Economics. Currently, he is PrimaVera Research Fellow in Collective Intelligence at Universiteit van Amsterdam. He is the Founder and a Senior Consultant of CommunityIntelligence Ltd. Mail to: george@Community-Intelligence.com.