"Evaluative inquiry is a way of fostering individual and team learning within an organization about issues that are critical to its purpose and what it values. It involves an intentional process of framing important questions, systematically gathering information relevant to the questions, and using the information to draw credible conclusions that can shape practice."

Evaluative Inquiry for Complex Times

By Beverly Parsons

Today's global financial crisis, environmental issues, and expanded knowledge access through the Internet put into sharp focus the complexity of today's world. Organizations need ways to handle complexity. Evaluative inquiry is one such tool.

Evaluative inquiry is a process by which organizational members systematically investigate questions of importance to them and their organization (Preskill and Torres, 1999). Evaluative inquiry is at the intersection of the fields of organization development and evaluation. Evaluative inquiry is a way of fostering individual and team learning within an organization about issues that are critical to its purpose and what it values. It involves an intentional process of framing important questions, systematically gathering information relevant to the questions, and using the information to draw credible conclusions that can shape practice.

Over the past five years, I have had the opportunity to guide the development and research of an evaluative inquiry process in a community college through a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF). The process enhances the ability of the organization to more flexibly respond to changing conditions than relying solely on goal setting and strategic planning processes. It is one example of an evaluative inquiry process.

In this article I describe how and why the process works. This information is intended to help the readers adapt the approach for the contexts in which they work.

What are Communities of Learning, Inquiry, and Practice (CLIP)?

Communities of Learning, Inquiry, and Practice (CLIP) are informal, dynamic groups of organizational members who learn together about their professional practice by gathering and analyzing data about a topic of importance to them. CLIP members learn an evaluative inquiry process with three steps: (1) design the inquiry; (2) collect data; and (3) make meaning and shape practice. Through participation in a CLIP, members simultaneously answer important questions and build their capacity to collaboratively address issues about their work on an ongoing basis, thus creating continual renewal in the organization based on what its members are learning through well-designed investigation of issues. In the community college setting where we developed this process, the CLIP members are faculty and staff and their focus is student learning and success.

Each CLIP consists of three to seven people with one person as the group facilitator. An overall CLIP Guide supports the CLIP work at the college, builds carefully designed linkages among the CLIPs across the college, and connects the whole process appropriately to the college's other processes and initiatives.

CLIPs support, and are supported by, the broader organization's goals. CLIPs are adaptable for use in other education settings, social service, health, business, and community initiatives.

At Bakersfield College in California

where we developed and tested the CLIP approach, CLIPs have developed a momentum of their own, with the number of participants growing each year and the college continuing to fund it. At Bakersfield, CLIPs have conducted twenty-four studies over four school years about instructional issues that are making a difference in classroom instruction, support services, and/or student learning as evidenced by the data gathered by the research team.

Through the development and research, we found that the following features of CLIPs were especially important in generating the momentum and productivity of the process:

» Within general parameters, CLIPs have the freedom to select their own members and topics, set their own schedules, determine their own budget, and tailor the inquiry process as long as it is focused on student learning and success—the organization's core mission. This freedom builds internal motivation among those involved that helps ensure that results are used.

» CLIP members focus their inquiry on their own work rather than on collecting information to shape someone else's work. Although the results of the CLIPs informed the work of many others, the inquiries focus on the members' own work and what matters to them.

» The CLIPs simultaneously focus on collaboration and inquiry, building a synergy that motivates completion of their investigation.

» There is a flexible link to the overall college goals and priorities related to student learning and success as well as other strategic initiatives such as, in the case of Bakersfield College, a focus on the experiences of first year students.

» The CLIPs use guiding principles that create an effective learning environment and promote a natural flow from inquiry to change in practice. The CLIP members are learning at all stages of the inquiry process and readying themselves for a natural shift in practice.

CLIP Components

The CLIP design has three major components: the work of individual CLIPs, multi-CLIP meetings, and an infrastructure within the organization. It is the latter two components that are especially important to the sustainability of the process in the organization.

» **Individual CLIPs' work:** Members of a given CLIPs collaboratively gather and analyze data. They practice the development of inquiry skills and conduct a meaningful inquiry about their work. (See sidebar for examples of the focus of the inquiries.)

Each CLIP determines its own schedule of meetings. One member of each CLIP serves as the group facilitator. Members receive a small stipend for participation and funds to carry out their planned inquiry.

Members develop questions that guide their inquiry. After gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data, they use their discoveries to shape their own professional practice and services. Based on the results of their findings, they also produce a final product (written document, PowerPoint presentation, or other format) to share with colleagues.

» **Multi-CLIP meetings:** All CLIPs participate in multi-CLIP meetings three times during the year. At the first

Online Modules about CLIPs

The online modules have four delivery modes embedded within them: web pages, videos, popups, and downloadable resources for individual and group learning.

The modules feature video vignettes where CLIP team facilitators and members share their CLIP experiences and observations. The modules include downloadable resources to support individual and collaborative inquiry. These include examples of CLIP documents and in-depth reference materials.

Here's what you'll find in the seven CLIP modules:

Module 1—explains what CLIPs are

Module 2—sets out the Guiding Principles for CLIPs

Modules 3-5—explain the inquiry steps

Module 6—explains the role of CLIP Facilitators

Module 7—describes how the CLIP Guide coordinates multiple CLIPs and aligns them with other change strategies

Example Inquiries at Bakersfield College

The questions around which CLIPs formed at Bakersfield Colleges included the following:

» Do peer study groups enhance student learning?

» How well do students who take developmental education courses when they enter college succeed in subsequent courses?

» What connections within the college do adjunct faculty need to be successful in their teaching?

» What assessment methods are most effective in computer studies courses?

"Through our CLIP group, we were able to design an important project, stay motivated and on task, divide the work load among several people, share ideas and insights, and enjoy working together in a positive environment."

—CLIP member

multi-CLIP meeting, the CLIPs learn how to conduct the inquiry process and each CLIP refines its preliminary inquiry plan for the school year. They leave the meeting with a specific and doable written plan of how to carry out their inquiry during the course of the year with each member understanding his/her responsibilities.

By the second meeting, the CLIPs have gathered some or all of their data. At the meeting they gain skills in making meaning from their data, determine if adjustments are needed in their remaining data collection activities, and refine their plan to ensure they can complete their inquiry by the end of the second semester.

The third and final meeting is a time for sharing preliminary results, receiving feedback from members of other CLIPs about what is most interesting about their findings, and celebrating the work together prior to completing their final products by July.

These meetings are key opportunities for shared learning by seeing the range of studies underway and building interest in one another's work.

» **CLIP infrastructure and placement within the organization:** An overall CLIP Guide supports the CLIP work at the college, builds carefully designed linkages among the CLIPs, and connects the whole process appropriately to the college's other processes and initiatives.

Benefits at Bakersfield College

As more and more CLIPs operate across the Bakersfield College campus—driven largely by the interest and enthusiasm of CLIP members—the process is changing the culture toward one of inquiry- and evidence-based decision-making.
The research conducted during the development process by an outside group showed that the CLIPs produced benefits to both the CLIP members and to Bakersfield College.

Benefits for CLIP Members

The research team found that participation affected CLIP team members primarily in the following ways:

» Team members enhanced the quality of their collegial relationships and relationships with students including improving their communication practices with students and colleagues across disciplines and departments. For example, one CLIP member said:

"Strong and healthy relationships improve student learning, communication with students, and overall feelings of success."

» Team members increased their knowledge and skills related to inquiry practices and evidence-based decision making regarding student learning and success. According to a CLIP member,

"The CLIP process has helped us determine the heart of an issue so that we are investigating and seeking information that will truly help solve a problem."

» Team members diversified their strategies to influence student learning as a result of what they learned through their particular inquiry. For example, the members of one CLIP began providing information to their students about the positive relationship between participation in study groups and grades. They also helped interested students form study groups and took action to get more locations on campus where study groups could comfortably meet.

» The process has made CLIP members more receptive to new and diverse ideas. For example, one CLIP member said,

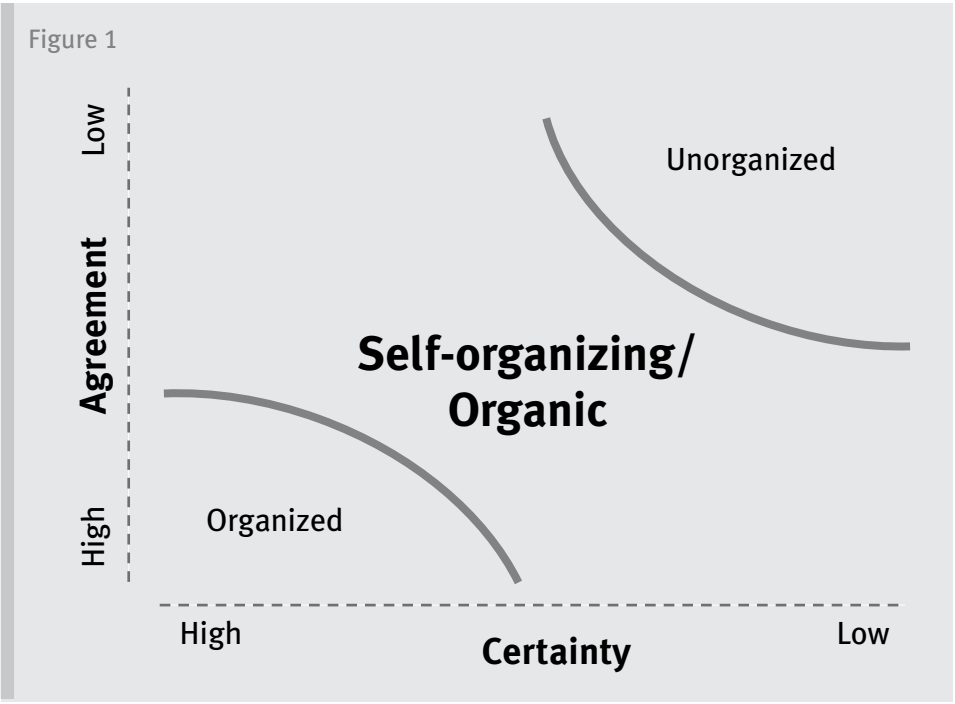
"At the beginning I was really determined almost not to change and thought I'm doing it the best way I can. This is really the only way that will do the job. [As a result of being in the CLIP], I realized that change is not always difficult and that improvements can result when you make a change. For me it worked perfectly.

Organizational Benefits

The college as a whole also is benefiting from the CLIP process. Research showed that:

» **Tasks** that faculty had not been able to complete are now being accomplished. For example, the math department reported that they had been working for several years to reach agreement on the core student learning outcomes in elementary and intermediate algebra. Through the CLIP process, they accomplished this task in one year for each of the levels of algebra.
» **Results** from several inquiries are being used well beyond the departments and classes of those who were in a CLIP. For example, a guide for assessing oral presentations developed by a CLIP is now being used in departments across campus, not just in the oral communication department.
» The Institutional Effectiveness Committee at Bakersfield College is building practices generated through the CLIP approach into the program review process to create a more productive environment.
» The positive experiences of being part of a CLIP is encouraging some CLIP members to become more active in college leadership.
» The data-based studies/inquiries conducted by the CLIPs are shifting the culture of the college toward greater inquiry- and evidence-based decision-making.
» The online modules are providing a link to other colleges who are interested in the work and building the visibility of Bakersfield College in the community college world.
» The benefits are worth the costs. By summer 2008 (four school years), twenty-four studies were completed about important issues related to teaching and learning. In a recent year, Bakersfield provided team stipends for CLIP members and their expenses. The staff time for the CLIP Guide is about .2 FTE of a faculty member.

Figure 1



Why the CLIP Approach Works: Linking Theory to Practice

> *"There is nothing more practical than a good theory."* – Kurt Lewin

We believe the CLIP approach works because it is grounded in how people learn and work in complex settings and uses a combination of two theories about systems.

Grounded in Learning Theories

The design of the individual CLIPs is grounded in learning theory. The traditional *cognitive learning* theories fit with learning environments in which teachers and textbooks are the conduits of knowledge. Over time, learning theories have emerged that are more in tune with the growing complexity of the learning context. *Socio-cultural learning* theorists highlight the importance of the learner constructing knowledge in interaction with others. The *value* that students attribute to the subject matter also affects their learning. *Connectivism* is a theory about active learning occurring in a rapidly changing environment. Learning is a shared, social experience as learners are accessing multiple sources and types of information; connecting with others through the socially open web; self-organizing into groups with similar interests; and actively being involved in learning that is discovery based and situated in real world settings (Siemens, 2004). The CLIP approach builds on these latter theories. In the development process we also take into account what is being learned through brain research, communities of practice, and large- and small-group processes.

Grounded in Systems Theories

The overall CLIP structure is a careful blending of two quite different theories about how systems work. The core idea of the systems field is to be holistic and recognize that the relationship among parts as well as the parts themselves make up a system. However, we found that the notions of being holistic and considering relationships as well as the parts was not sufficient to design the CLIP process successfully.

The systems field—a broad ranging interdisciplinary field—basically has spawned two different types of theories that are being applied to organizations. One type assumes that systems move toward order and stability. The focus of the organizational leaders is on putting in place structures, processes, and policies that encourage order and stability. Another type contends that in complex situations the organization is in a continual state of intermittent equilibrium that is shaped by the individuals within it. These theories come out of the field of "complexity sciences." The term "complexity sciences" encompasses a number of disciplines and academic fields that have grown up around the study of systems as diverse as the stock market, ant colonies, biosphere, brain, and immune system. Researchers and practitioners are seeking answers to fundamental questions about living, adaptable, changeable systems. The focus is not on trying to control these dynamics bur rather to understand and encourage them in ways that embrace complexity. A phenomenon called "self-organizing" dominates the dynamics of the situation. The overall systemic shifting patterns are the result of huge numbers of decisions and adjustments being made by many individual agents. (See Johnson, 2001, and Zimmerman and colleagues, 2001, for especially readable descriptions of complex adaptive systems. See Stacey, 2007, for a more academic description.)

We needed to work with both of these types of theories. Before explaining our use of both types of theories, here is a further explanation of the two types.

Ralph Stacey (1996) provides a useful way to think about the relationship of complex systems to the more controlled, stable systems to which we are accustomed. He states that the degree of (a) agreement and (b) certainty in a social system determines the general type of approach one uses to manage a system. "Agreement" refers to the degree of accord among, for example, those in a group, team, organization, or community about the fundamental principles which the system is built on and the activities it engages in. "Certainty" refers to how predictably cause-and-effect relationships among actions, conditions, and consequences can be anticipated. (See *Figure 1*. This figure draws on the work of Stacey as well as adaptations by Zimmerman and colleagues, 2001, and the Human Systems Dynamics Institute.)

At the end of the spectrum where the levels of certainty and agreement are high, one finds stable, organized, predictable systems such as the traditional hierarchical organization. At the other end, where systems exhibit both low certainty and low agreement, one finds a random, unorganized system such as one might

find in a time of natural disaster. The system has essentially disintegrated.

Between these two ends of the spectrum is a special dynamic. The system is far from the equilibrium of either an organized state or the disintegration of an unorganized state. It is a complex adaptive system (CAS). Here is the core idea: *In complex adaptive systems, many semi-independent and diverse agents, who are free to act in unpredictable ways, continually interact with each other. They are adapting to each other and the environment as a whole.* They can create influential system-wide patterns. They are not necessarily moving toward stability and they tend not to be controllable.

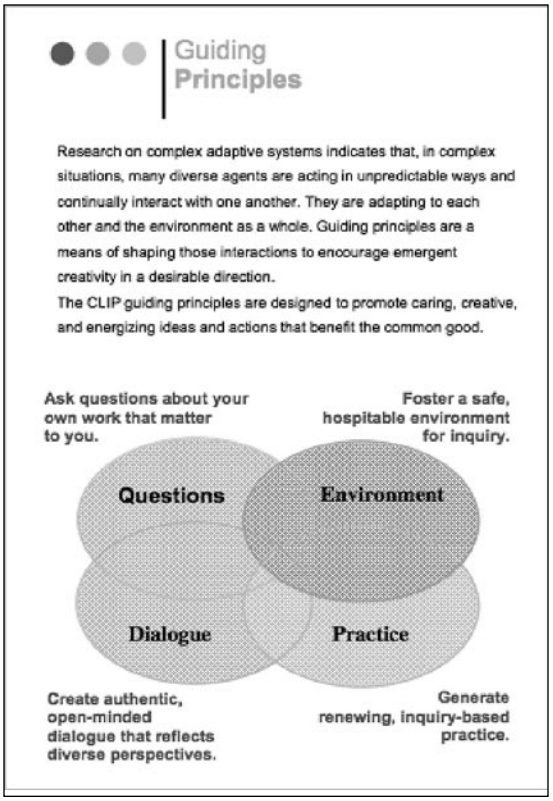
Such a system exhibits properties that might not be expected. It does not gradually move to being either stable or unstable on a long-term basis. Rather, it is continually in a state of disequilibrium and intermittent equilibrium. This is a state characterized by contradiction and contentions, cooperation and competition operating simultaneously, and the coexistence of interdependence and independence.

Such a system exhibits properties that might not be expected. Of particular practical importance is that these self-organizing systems have the potential to suddenly and unexpectedly move to a radically different form of order due to the continual adaptation of agents to one another. A new order emerges with no preplanning. Diversity is important to creating new orders.

CAS theory challenges how social systems are managed. Traditionally, the management of businesses, educational institutions, and other organizations has focused on maintaining stability. The emphasis is on identifying long-term plans, developing shared visions, and agreeing on underlying premises. These have utility in situations where conditions are stable and where agreement can be achieved among people. It is possible to make reasonably accurate predictions of cause and effect when one is working with systems in the organized zone (high agreement and high certainty).

In today's world, a social system or organization must be able to make intentional changes in fairly stable aspects of the system *and*, at the same time, support a zone of organic, self-organizing activity where people and organizations are guided by their own learning rather than by predetermined plans or outcomes.

Many current approaches to systems change assume that if the factors that influence a system are known, these factors can be controlled and outcomes predicted. CAS theory extended to human systems posits that there is limited utility in looking at what outcomes occurred and then trying to replicate the conditions that caused these outcomes. If the conditions had been slightly different, they could just as well have created a different outcome. Also, if those involved in the change were actively engaged in double-loop learning (learning and reflecting on their learning), they were adjusting both their behavior and their intentions or ideas about what constituted a desired outcome.



Application to CLIP Process

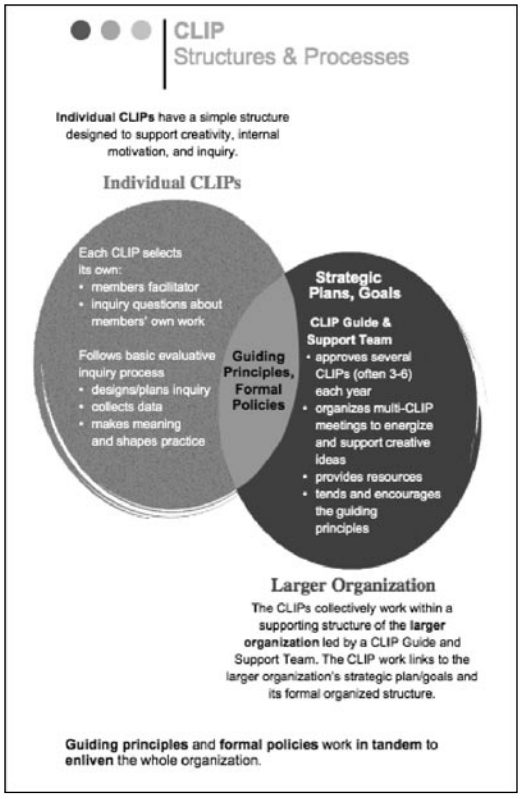
The CLIP process intentionally builds on both the organized *and* self-organizing dynamics. It links to the college's focus on specifying student learning outcomes and their measurement which is grounded in the organized dynamic. The inquiry process also provides an organized structure—design the inquiry, gather data, make meaning and shape practice.

The CLIP process builds on the self-organizing dynamic by giving the faculty the opportunity to investigate questions of interest to them and select others with whom they will collaborate. As stated earlier, self-organizing dynamics involve many semi-independent and diverse agents who are free to act in unpredictable ways and are continually interacting with each other as they adapt to each other and the environment as a whole. Each CLIP is interacting intensively around designing their inquiry, gathering data that brings in new perspectives, and making meaning from the data to apply to their practice. The CLIPs are designed to encourage the self-organizing in a general direction that is congruent with the basic values of the participants and focused on the overall direction of the college, yet it gives the CLIP members great freedom to generate new areas for investigation that may not have been thought of by those leading the planned changes within the organization. The CLIP process was designed to work along side institution-wide strategic initiatives with specific outcomes.

This leveraging of both types of system theories is designed to address the complexity of the education setting. A CLIP identifies a focus for an inquiry that relates to student learning and success (the institutional focus), while the inquiry process itself is designed to reveal new understandings about questions that matter to a particular CLIP. The flexibility encourages creativity within the organization.

Use of Guiding Principles

To support a self-organizing dynamic, it is important to determine guiding principles that are congruent with the basic values of those involved and focus on the overall direction of the organization. The CLIPs at Bakersfield College developed eight



guiding principles; the essence of the principles is captured in four:

» Ask questions that matter.
» Foster a safe, hospitable environment for inquiry.
» Create authentic, open-minded dialogue that reflects diverse perspectives.
» Generate renewing, inquiry-based practice.

The CLIP guiding principles are designed to promote caring, creative, and energizing ideas and actions that benefit the common good and work along side formal policies that grow out of the institution's more controlled approach to change. (More details about the principles are in the second online module.)

Although the self-organizing dynamic is the dominant dynamic of the CLIP process, the design has aspects of the organized and unorganized dynamics. By recognizing the different dynamics, users of such processes are able to adjust their approach to leverage the appropriate dynamic in the situation.

Similarly, although goal-focused strategic plans and processes such as establishing institutional student learning outcomes and assessments are based primarily on the organized dynamic, they benefit from using elements of the self-organizing and unorganized dynamics as well.

The overall key is to be conscious of these different system dynamics; understand their defining characteristics; develop a way to attend to the patterns over time and across locations (e.g., variations across departments, connections to the community); and consider how to intentionally use structures and processes that leverage each for the benefit of the organization's purpose.

All in all, building an evaluative inquiry process into an organization that intentionally capitalizes on the self-organizing dynamic along with its existing strategic planning processes creates an ongoing strategy for renewal and success. The strategy combines (a) establishing goals and strategic action plans; (b) using CLIPs to generate the internal motivation of its members to make their own adjustments throughout the organization congruent with the organization's purpose; and (b) recognizing the importance of support from top administrators and professional leaders who understand the intentional use of multiple theories to guide systems change.

Note: An overview video and modules about the CLIP process are free shareware available at www.insites.org/clip.

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