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The Evolution of ICA's Facilitation Methods

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One of the most frequently asked questions for ICA Canada staff is: Where did these methods come from? What are their sources?

ICA began in the 50s as a study and teaching group, then a study-teaching-action group. Its concern was bringing methods and spirit to a wide public. At the heart of its methods was phenomenology or existentialism. Its mentors were people like Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Ortega y Gasset etc. All these teachers were a response to industrialism and the lopsided vision of scientific thought (truth out there). The scientific approach had gutted religion and left humanity without a self. These authors were all attempting to re-establish that the meaning of life was to be found in the depths of life and not in abstractions. You are existing not when you are thinking about it but when you are self-consciously immersed in living. The ICA methods have always served to immerse people in the reality of their own situation and their own depths at the same time.

The Discussion Method

(aka the Artform Method, aka the Focused Conversation Method) The most basic of its tools, the discussion method, had its origins in the first course that ICA developed for the public, when it was used in the surface-to-depth conversations on Picasso's Guernica artform and on Requiem for a Heavyweight. The intent was to expose a radical life address in a particular cultural frame. The conversation moved participants through phenomenological levels of response - objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional - pushing participants to say where the dynamics of these artforms were going on in their own lives. We wanted to put people in a box and let them wrestle with their own self-consciousness. Hence, the conversational tool was labelled the artform method. Today it is called the focused conversation method. When the Institute launched an urban community demonstration project (named Fifth City) in the black ghetto on the West Side of Chicago in the early 60s, the artform method became a primary education tool for the work with the black youth of the community, and in the community preschool set up by the ICA.

The Workshop Method

The workshop method was also slung together as a tool for eliciting the participation of the community in problem-solving and local people were trained in it. This context-brainstorming-organizing- and naming method picked up on the brainstorming and gestalting method being used in the Rand Corporation. The two very different methods of artform conversation and workshop method were moulded so as to follow the same underlying pattern of steps: objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional.

The work in 5th City also generated the problemat method. “All the houses in the community were visited and asked the same question: “What are the major problems in this community?” The teams of canvassers met and did a massive workshop pooling all the problems. When they counted them, there were just over 5000. These were organized under the categories of economic, political, educational, style, and symbol. The community now had a focus for its creativity and action. This method was the precursor of the obstacles section in the current Facilitated Planning process.

The Strategic Planning Method

(aka the Facilitated Planning Method, aka the LENS Method, aka the Consult Method) Then in 1971, the Institute sent invitations out to a 1000 people to work on a strategic plan for social

transformation. Using the Social Process triangles as a screen, they used a new method of planning which had just been created. Using the balanced model of the social process as a vision for the future, the participants operating in three centres, spotted, analysed, and wrote a 100-page document on the contradictions, or obstacles, that had to be dealt with in social transformation. The next step was to brainstorm and organize 77 'proposals' (along the lines of Jean Jacques Servan-Schreiber's book which had just hit the bookstores.) Then, using the proposals as a jumping off point, participants went to work to create action tactics to deal with the key arenas of contradiction.

After this research assembly, work began on a new course (the Convoy Course, the NINS Course (New Individual and New Society) for getting citizens to think and make plans for responsible global-local action. This wedded the problemat, the contradictions, proposal-making and tactics creation into a new course called LENS (Living Effectively in the New Society). The intent was citizen involvement in the local, but out of global context. In 1973, it was tried out on large corporations, after some design turns on the dial, and with considerable success. LENS has been used by many in the ICA network ever since with many of the companies listed in the Fortune 500 and with hundreds of others. It has set many companies back on their feet.

In 1974, a foreshortened form of the LENS programme was tried

out in urban neighbourhoods, first styled, “The Local Community Convocation” and then “Local Community Meetings” (or. in the U.S., “Town Meetings”) . ICA led about 6000 of these meetings in communities round the world, between 1976 and 1979.

These participatory methods received their real test, when, between 1975 and 1984, ICA launched community development projects on every continent except the then Soviet Union. Human Development Training Institutes were set up in every main development location to train village leaders in these methods. Once we started doing the Vision, Contradictions, proposal, tactics and implementaries format on the consults for beginning community development projects around the world, it carried over to the LENS process.. So, we redesigned LENS to have the same methodology as the consults. So, the LENS method is really a copying of the consult method used to launch community development projects. It seemed to work much better with the business community after that..

Then, in 1985, some in ICA began to raise the question of how to train the general public in these methods. In many offices round the world people experimented with courses training people in the discussion and workshop methods, as well as in facilitated planning. These courses have been picked up by several other ICA offices on several continents for training local people in facilitation methods. They are now global courses with well developed manuals in great demand particularly by

communities, service groups, and local government. Now, ICA Canada is dedicated to “facilitating a culture of participation” through bringing these methods to every sector of society’.