Adaptive Action: Teach and Learn

by Royce Holladay

In Human Systems Dynamics (HSD), we rely on a short list of simple rules to build coherence across our diverse, open, nonlinear system. The use of six generalizable and actionable rules has helped us build self-similar patterns between and among the 300 Associates who participate in our network. These same rules, with slight variations, have guided decisions and actions of HSD Institute in the ten years since our inception:

- Seek the true and the useful
- Teach and learn in every interaction
- Attend to the whole, the part, and the greater whole
- Give and get value for value
- Engage in joyful practice
- Share your HSD story

Over a period of months, the Change the World newsletter will provide an in-depth exploration of each of the HSD simple rules. Last month we started with “Seek the true and the useful”. This month’s focus is on “Teach and learn in every interaction.”

At its most elemental level, “teach and learn in every interaction” means that we stand in perpetual inquiry - curious about our world, curious about what we can contribute to others, and curious about what we can learn to increase our own adaptive capacity. In HSD, we think of teaching and learning as inseparable, simultaneous, and mutual. We do not teach without learning; we cannot learn without teaching. We also recognize that standing in inquiry does not ask us to release or ignore our own expertise. What it does ask is that, even as we share our expertise, we do it in ways that consider the needs of others. We grant them voice as we listen and learn from them; as we also share what we know in ways that make sense and build capacity of others.

So when we talk about teaching and learning in every interaction, we mean that as we remain sensitive to the world around us, we are also responsive to the needs and perspectives of others. When the individuals in a system operate according to this simple rule, their shared inquiry builds adaptive capacity as they see, understand, and influence the patterns that create their lives.

In HSD we define inquiry in the following way:

- Turn judgment into curiosity
- Turn disagreement into mutual exploration
- Turn defensiveness into self-reflection

If you think of “teach and learn” in terms of inquiry, this provides a framework for thinking about what that can mean in your own decision making and action taking.

**Turn judgment into curiosity.** When we teach and learn in every interaction, we stand in inquiry, stepping away from judgment. We teach others as we share what we know, contributing to the rich tapestry of our shared world. We teach others as we come to understand what they need to know. We share what we can in language and metaphor that has meaning in the context of the other person’s life. We learn as we pay attention and because we are curious - about others, about their perspectives, and about our world. We ask questions; we observe; and we are open to receiving what the world has to offer.

**Turn disagreement into mutual exploration.** Teaching and learning in every interaction requires that we remain open to truth and to sharing, even in the face of conflict and/or disagreement. When we stand in inquiry, we teach, sharing our perspectives, clarifying our perceptions and assumptions about the questions that would otherwise separate us from those with whom we are in disagreement. At the same time we learn when we are open to hearing what others have to say about their own perceptions and assumptions.

**Turn defensiveness into self-reflection.** In HSD we respond to defensiveness by exploring our own assumptions and perspectives. We learn about ourselves, and grow in understanding about what makes us defensive. Using those new insights, we change our behavior, moving into greater inquiry and openness.
In the open, diverse, nonlinear systems where humans live, work and play, we are buffeted by forces that we may or may not know. We are influenced at all scales, across known and unknown connections. Human systems are inundated with data, information, and images. We encounter people who are vastly different from ourselves and from each other. The essence of our lives is not only dependent on history and shaped by our every decision; it is also dependent on the decisions, actions, and influences of others. In such a complex and turbulent landscape, teaching and learning in every interaction allows us to build sensitive, responsive, and robust connections that weave the tapestry of our shared culture.
# Teach and Learn in Every Interaction Worksheet

**Teach and learn in every interaction:**

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- What do I have to offer that will contribute to the productivity and adaptive capacity of this group?
- How can I share what I know in ways that speak into the listening of those around me?
- How do I remain in curiosity as I share expertise with those who would benefit from my input?
- What do I need to know to be a better contributor to this group?
- What do others in this group have that would help me?
- What do I need to learn to contribute to the whole, part, and greater whole?

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- How can I explain my perspective in ways that are helpful to the person I am in conflict with?
- What will help others see my perspective, even if they don’t agree with it?
- What can I say about the whole, part, and greater whole that might be helpful to both of us?
- What can I learn about this other person’s perspective that will help us find a solution to our challenge?
- What questions will help me learn what I need to learn?
- What in our environment may be contributing to our conflict?

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- What triggers the defensiveness I’m feeling?
- What assumptions are at the heart of my own response?
- What do I need to see in my own responses that will help me change my own future response?
- How do I express my position to others to help them understand my perspective?