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The Ethics of Promoting and Assigning Adult Developmental Exercises: A Critical Analysis of the Immunity to Change Process

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Abstract: The *Immunity to Change* (ITC) process devised by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey is promoted as an influential technique for creating individual and organizational change. A critical analysis of the ITC process applied in university settings and organizational contexts show that an unintended result is the unwillingness and inability of some participants to participate adequately. Significant theoretical and ethical implications arise in the interplay between three interrelated variables (a) the role and competence of the facilitator, (b) expectations and capabilities of the participants, and (c) the mental demands and assumptions of the process. The inquiry illustrate that the ITC process is probably built upon an implicit assumption that change into greater mental complexity is always good and right, and its inherent structure creates demands that can put participants “in over their heads.” The main conclusion is that developmentally-aware, ethical approaches to using transformational practices such as the ITC should meet at least three demands: they should be conducted as voluntary activities on the part of well-informed participants, they should integrate an adult developmental perspective into the process itself, and they should openly allow the possibility that it is the organizations that may also need to change.

Keywords: adult development, ethics, organizational change, teaching.

Introduction

How are we to use exercises meant to promote developmental change in an ethically proper way? Adult development advocates are eager to promulgate the practice of transformational change curricula into more complex ways of meaning making; however, rather than uncritically incorporating these techniques into a variety of settings, it is important to consider the hidden assumptions and ethical implications of these techniques. Such examination has the potential of improving the quality and usefulness of techniques within the adult development field (Ross, 2008; Stein & Heikkinen, 2009)

Higher education is one arena easily available for promoting and encouraging adult development of mental complexity. Certainly, if we want education to be informed by adult developmental theory, we must do more than teach theories of adult development as part of course content. Curricula that actually support the development of mental and emotional complexity are necessary (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 1999; Baxter Magolda, 2000, 2001; Hoare, 2006; Kegan et al., 2001; King & Baxter Magolda, 2004; King & Kitchener, 1994; Marchand, 2008; Stevens-Long & Barner, 2006). One way of accomplishing this goal is to incorporate transformational exercises like the *Immunity to Change* (ITC) to class activities. The ITC process devised by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey is promoted as an influential technique for

creating individual and organizational change, but my experiences in utilizing the ITC process are more mixed than the usually enthusiastic responses expressed by for example Jonathan Reams (2009) and Kegan and Laskow Lahey (2009).

The field of fostering adult development includes several methodologies within different domains of life and with different target groups, for example transformative and emancipatory learning, working with moral dilemmas in education, individual and one-on-one efforts, and action inquiry in small groups (Ross, 2006). The ITC process can be seen as an example of a method aimed at promoting development and has been described in several formats: books (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001a, 2009), scientific journals (Bowe, Lahey, Armstrong, & Kegan, 2003; Bowe, Lahey, Kegan, & Armstrong, 2003; Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001b), book reviews (Reams, 2009), interviews (Sparks, 2002), and periodicals (Business Digest, 2009). All accounts emphasize the efficacy of this approach, and few negative aspects have been brought to light. I have found no studies that address inadequacies or tests of effectiveness. The texts are written by the originators or people who have used and found the process valuable. I have found no studies that describe the use of the ITC in an educational setting with students.

The purpose of this article is to critically analyze implications of putting the ITC process into practice in educational settings and organizational contexts, the ethics of doing so, and key assumptions that underlie the procedure. This article uses a three-part presentation that includes the basic structure of the ITC process, an example of how it was incorporated in higher education, and the results of that experience. This background sets the stage for a critical examination of the role of the teacher or facilitator, ethical implications of participants' abilities and reactions, and underlying mental demands and assumptions. Desired outcomes of the process are also discussed. Ethical considerations and how assumptions of adult development shape the process are at the heart of the concerns discussed in this article. Specific difficulties of using the ITC in an educational setting are the starting point, but the analysis expands to encompass implications for other situations, for example working life, and universal inquires and objections.

The ITC Process in Practice

The Methodology of the ITC Process

The method was initially created to facilitate individual and organizational change in corporate settings (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001a). The methodology addresses two questions: why changing human behavior is so difficult, and why achieving desired behavioral changes does not happen as often as we would prefer. The method provides a tool to overcome these concerns by identification of a personal immune-system that works to inhibit certain behaviors and/or the fulfillment of certain values. It is based upon the assumption that real change is not a matter of learning new skills. Rather, it requires changes in the level of mental complexity. The goals or possible outcomes of the ICT are "personal and professional well-being" (Bowe, Lahey, Armstrong et al., 2003, p. 716), more effective organizations, and development of mental complexity.

The ITC process can be seen as an application of the constructive-developmental theory by Robert Kegan (1982, 1994). Kegan proposes three adult meaning systems that make sense of the

world in qualitatively different ways: socialized mind, self authoring mind, and self-transforming mind. Persons having a socialized mind are strongly influenced by views and expectations of others, which affects how they think, feel and act. With a self-authoring mind, persons have the ability to have one's own view independent of others' expectations since they are able to coordinate other beliefs with their own convictions; they also have the capability to examine thoughts and feelings. For persons with self-transforming meaning-making, one's sense of self is not tied to particular identities and they can look through their own agenda.

The first version of ITC process was described in the book *How the way we talk can change the way we work: seven languages for transformation* by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, which was followed by popularized and shorter descriptions (Bowe, Lahey, Armstrong et al., 2003; Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001b) until the most recent book *Immunity to Change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization* appeared. The basic structure of the technique is the same, but the labels, instructions, framing and number of steps have varied (see Table 1). In this article I will refer to the first book and related articles as ITC 1, the new book as ITC 2, and ITC for general statements about the process.

Table 1. Descriptions of the ITC process

		Part 1			Part 2		
		'The Table'			'The Test'		
		Commitment	Doing/not doing instead	Hidden competing commitment	Big assumptions	Reflection and test	
(Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001a)	Language of commitment	Language of personal responsibility	Language of competing commitment	Language of big assumption. Identifying assumption	Language of big assumption. 4 steps		
(Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001b)		Stage 1		Stage 2	Stage 3, 5 steps		
(Bowe, Lahey, Armstrong et al., 2003)	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5, unclear includes test		
(Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009)		Diagnosing ITC				Overcoming the ITC	
(Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009)	Commitment (improvement goal)	Doing/not doing instead	Hidden competing commitment	Big assumptions	Three phases, including 9 exercises		

The ITC process has two parts. The first aims at uncovering the commitments to change and diagnosing the person's immunity to change, and the second is a series of exercises designed to create change in behaviors. The first part consists in four steps which are presented in a table of

four columns (see Table 1), where the table is used to structure the process and provide an overview. The work described in the first column is to identify personal commitment, which is done through answering the question: What sort of experiences would be more supportive of your development at work? The formulation of the initial question varies in the different versions. The answer is then examined to identify underlying values and reformulated into a personal commitment. In the second column, behaviors are enumerated – both actions and omissions – that interfere with the commitment.

The task of the third column is to identify a competing commitment. Participants are prompted to reflect on fears or anxieties that arise if the identified actions, in column two, are not performed. The passive worries are then transformed into an active statement, which becomes the competing commitment. This serves as a new explanation of why certain behaviors are not performed, since persons hold values that are in contradiction to and in competition with the other. What was previously viewed as obstructive behaviors is now seen as supportive actions of the competing commitment, but nevertheless preventing people from achieving their primary goals. A first picture of the “immunity system” is revealed which is called the immunity map or X-ray since it is “a picture of the invisible made visible” (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 32). Modifying the immune system requires that we identify the underlying hidden assumption on which the competing commitment rests (see column four, Table 1). This assumption is called the ‘big assumption’: it is the internal truth that a person creates to sustain his or her immunity to change; identifying it is a difficult process (Kegan & Lahey, 2001b).

The purpose of the second part of the process is to question and test the validity of the big assumption and thereby overcome the person’s immunity to change, a goal that is realized through several experimental self-reflective exercises including a test. In ITC 1 the second part is described as consisting of four or five exercises, observing and recording current behavior, looking for contrary experiences, exploring the history, and designing, running, and evaluating a test. ITC 2 includes a set of nine exercises in three phases, including all those previously mentioned plus additional ones, for example a pre/post survey to get external input from colleagues and family on your improvement goal, and to reflect on how the learning can be consolidated in the future.

The general structure of ITC 1 and ITC 2 are essentially the same, but in the ITC 2 there are substantial elaborations in the description of the methodology for participants and added checklists and surveys to support and extend the process. Other changes are that the initial question is more value neutral, a greater emphasis is placed on finding a “good” improvement goal and first commitment as a starting point, and the importance of involving family members and co-workers in the process is emphasized.

The Use of the ITC 1 Process in Higher Education

The theoretical work of Robert Kegan is central in the area of adult development (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kjellström, 2005), and the ITC exercise was incorporated in my university teaching with students (Master and Ph.D. level) and healthcare professionals (mainly nurses and assistant nurses). I used Kegan’s theory in my Ph.D. thesis, and my research position at a university has facilitated deeper studies and use of several adult development methods and theories in research.

Additional writings on the topic proved useful to increase my knowledge of how to facilitate the process, (Bowe, Lahey, Armstrong et al., 2003; Bowe, Lahey, Kegan et al., 2003; Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001b; Sparks, 2002). This exercise became part of courses on ethics and professional development on seven occasions, with more than 100 participants. The ITC 1 process was employed in accordance with the recommendations of Kegan and Laskow Lahey, with only some modifications in order to suit the delivery formats in the educational setting. Namely the initial question used to form the first commitment was reformulated to suit students who were not simultaneously working professionals. The process was divided into two parts. The first part asked participants to fill in four columns in a table (see Table 1 & 2), allowing their immunity to change to be identified. The second part was composed of five self-reflection tasks, including a test to perform and evaluate.

Two delivery formats were used with different students groups: meeting in class or interaction through a web platform. I always emphasized that they should not disclose more than they felt comfortable sharing. During a lecture or workshop lasting two hours, students were led through the process of filling in the table and were then encouraged to reflect on their responses and create a test. The filled-in table and written report on the self-reflection tasks were sent to me and discussed verbally in small groups led by me. No written text was shared among the participants, and participants were given the choice of whether they wanted to tell others about their commitments and test results.

In the web-based course the students (health professionals) read an article (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001b), listened to a lecture, and read a sixteen-page Swedish document (created by me because my participants were not used to reading English) that explained all the steps. (Kjellström, 2006). After filling in all columns, they sent their tables to me and to an online discussion forum with four to five participants, where all students saw what others in their group had written. This sharing is an example of moving private or personal assessments into a public sphere. I commented and helped them with the table to ensure participants had an adequate starting point for the next part, which consisted of five tasks. They performed and reported the assignments one by one to the small online discussion group. Subsequently, group participants read and commented on each other's work, because observing others' experiences could provide a valuable learning experience. The reports on each of the five tasks were always read and sometimes commented on by me. The tables were sent to me initially and further distributed if the person consented. The incorporation of group discussions was done to give participants an opportunity to share experiences, and ponder similarities and differences. This is not something that Kegan and Laskow Lahey describe in their first work, but they put an emphasis on the importance of sharing experiences because it illustrates that things that often are considered merely personal are also general for others (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001a).

Results from Doing the ICT 1 Process in the Educational Setting

On the one hand my experiences can be described as a "success." The instructions of the ITC 1 process by Kegan and Laskow Lahey helped me create a learning situation that seemed to work quite well for a majority of the participants. Some students reportedly regarded it as a profound experience that they wanted to continue to use and spread to others. On the other hand, I also had experiences with participants feeling less comfortable in the situation, which could be interpreted

as “failures.” This section will mainly be concerned with what went amiss, because it is the examination of these experiences that builds a foundation for further discussion and a critical analysis of the various factors that might have produced these outcomes and the ethical issues they raise. The two prominent results elaborated here are that persons did not complete required parts of the ITC 1 process, and a few did not want to participate, and therefore refused to do it.

Problems with the first part of the process are that some people had difficulty putting content into the columns. The most common problem was an inability to articulate a personal fear or worry that could be turned into a counter commitment, but it was also problematic to identify the big assumption and to present actions that inhibit the primary commitment. Even after several occasions of written feedback by email or personal communications, a few individuals produced a barely acceptable table as a starting point for the test and self-reflection exercises.

Other difficulties arose in the second part involving the self-reflective tasks. The tests run by my students often tested third column commitments rather than fourth column “big assumptions.” Regardless, a test of the counter commitments seemed adequate for the exercise to be performed. An examination of the 67 tables filled in by health care personnel shows that one of the most common topics was fear of calling attention to someone who is doing something wrong, often because being liked by everyone else is so important to them. When they ran a test where they actually expressed these opinions, they realized for the most part that nothing bad follows such actions, and that raising their voices was generally appreciated. This experience was both powerful and empowering for nearly everyone who ran this kind of test. But an important limitation was that to my knowledge there were no or few generalizations made to other domains of life, which might reduce some of the transformational power of the exercise. Another problem was that when asked to reflect on their own behaviors some people only described actions or reactions of others.

Some people were unable to do part of the exercise as I provided it with its limitations regarding support or assistance, and some students refused to do certain parts, for example, reflect on childhood experiences, provide a personal experience, admit vulnerability, or talk in a follow up group discussion. On one occasion several students objected and had negative feelings about the exercise because it was perceived as being too personal, and the students expressed the idea that it felt very weird to run tests “on” their classmates, which resulted in a discontinuation of the ITC 1 as an obligatory assignment.

Critical Reflections on the ITC Process

The criticism below starts with a focus on the potential impact of two variables that need to be considered: the capacities of the leader or process facilitator and those of the participants. Possible desirable outcomes are discussed and a complementary solution of adapting societal structures to the mental demands of people is proposed. Finally the analysis is concerned with the mental demands in and assumptions of the ITC process, which can play an important part in how the process is utilized. The critical examination of the ITC process is not limited to the first version, because the general structure is essentially the same in all present versions.

Facilitator's Choices and Capacities

This section provides examples of how I handled different situations in order to illustrate more general implications of the role of the facilitator and teacher. I acknowledge that some of the failures are probably due to my way of implementing the process, for example the way I framed and explained the process to the participants. The incident when several students questioned the process accentuates the need to firmly establish the exercise in the work group, a task I probably failed on that occasion since they did not sense a trusting environment. Kegan and Lahey emphasize that a leader needs to be an active advocate of the process by setting a good example and promoting a commitment to positive change work; simply authorizing the exercise is not sufficient (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009, p. 81). In education and classes the teacher is the leader and authority, and needs to establish trust and authority. How a teacher with constraints in his/her role and setting can do this differs from how a process facilitator in another setting can do this: trust is not always consistent with the teaching role—the teacher is often not a confidant whereas a process facilitator may be.

When people were not able to fill in the table or resisted parts of the process I handled this by backing off. For example if the columns were not filled in as required for a perfect starting point, and the feedback had yielded an acceptable table, I viewed this as sufficient, without further judgment or comment. When people did not want to do part of the exercise their wishes were always accepted, and no one was ever forced to participate in any stage. This management was inspired by an ethical consideration, for example inspiration from Kegan and Lahey's ground rules that it is up to the people participating to decide how much they want to share (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001a). Later reflection led me to realize that I had not shared sufficiently with my students my motivations for administering this exercise and my hopes for their beneficial experiences. Transparency about reasons for using the exercise as part of introducing it may have helped both students and me by providing space to discuss successes and failures on individual and group level.

My personal assumption at that time was that personal development in qualitative phases is a positive factor that needs to be promoted. Using Kegan's theory (1982, 1994) to interpret my own orientation toward fostering adult development, I see that it was "subject" in my mind (in Kegan's terms), which means that it was a perspective through which I unknowingly looked at the world. To have a goal of fostering adult development as a subject may cause an overemphasis on the intervention's positive aspects and neglect of its possible side effects. Only when I (or others, presumably) distance myself from attachment to the idea of fostering adult development and take it as an "object," as if being an outsider to the adult development perspective, does the critique put forward in this article become possible. That is the shift I made in order to produce this critique.

In the current educational system the time and competence of teachers is also an important issue to discuss. The most recent version (ITC 2) demands that teachers spend more time doing the first part (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009). The first edition suggested a timeframe of 2-4 hours, to identify the immunity system, but the more recent version includes several examples that expanded the timeframe to two days. Given how classes are scheduled within the educational system, the time with a teacher in class is limited. The question is whether teachers

have enough time, but also whether the time they do have is best put to this task or to other tasks, i.e., is this exercise the ‘best’ use of class time? In addition, do teachers have sufficient psychological training to support the students adequately?

For a teacher to assign any task is an exercise of power. Kegan and Laskow Lahey talk about the need to deliberately create an optimal conflict, which is portrayed the following way:

- The *persistent* experience of some frustration, dilemma, life puzzle, quandary, or personal problem that is...
- Perfectly designed to cause us to *feel the limits* of our current way of knowing...
- In some sphere of our living that we *care about*, with...
- *Sufficient supports* so that we are neither overwhelmed by the conflict nor able to escape or diffuse it. (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009, p. 54)

But what right does a teacher to create optimal conflicts in peoples’ lives? Most people have pressures in all domains of life. Is it good to create another conflict even if the intention is to resolve it in the long run? The answer is not evidently affirmative because there are interventions that promote development without being designed to be structurally disequilibrating (Manners, Durkin, & Nesdale, 2004, p. 21).

One assumption of the methodology is that moving things from the private to public sphere will facilitate a successful process. This is a kind of support group process, but again, people self-select into support groups for the purpose of hearing and listening — there is transparency about what goes on there and strict norms of behaviour. A key aspect of my argument is that in educational settings, the self-selection into classes is for purposes other than personal self development. It is impossible to exert the same kind of normative structure around privacy, since discussing assignments, topics, lectures, homework, and the like is a routine part of the learning process for students in these settings.

Kegan and Laskow Lahey claim that too much adult learning occurs in classes separated from the workplace, and that it is more powerful to teach people in their workplaces together with their colleagues rather than enroll them in individual courses (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009). Although providing learning experiences for adults in the workplace can be beneficial for certain types of material, using the workplace (and the workgroup) as the location for this kind of an exercise also raises concerns. Workers may feel particularly constrained in these settings, believing that their performance on the exercise will influence their employment and/or their professional relationships with their coworkers. One could argue that this limitation can be overcome when the facilitator lays the foundation for trust and safety, but a counterargument similar to the one offered for educational institutions must still be considered: does the organizational environment create an implicit coercion for workers to comply?

Participants’ Choices and Capacities

Several of my students were very perplexed when asked to work on emotional aspects of themselves, finding the task very difficult. They were not used to admitting and articulating emotions or publicly expressing negative aspects about themselves. Education is currently

organized to emphasize cognitive knowledge (Stevens-Long & Barner, 2006), and students do not expect to reveal their emotions or be asked to integrate their self concepts into knowledge construction. The recent book stresses that participants need to be more dedicated to working with an issue that is meaningful to them and to leave behind their immunity to change toward it (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009), but how much commitment can we expect or require from students or employees in a hierarchical structure and culture? As an example, the ITC was used to increase the sales of a pharmaceutical company, but as Abigail Jenkins says in an interview “as it required a significant level of commitment to both personal and group change – while still in the pressure-cooker environment – five team members inevitably left along the way” (Business Digest, 2009, pp. 8-9). This ITC work was facilitated by very competent consultants Lisa Laskow and her colleague Bob Goodman. Noteworthy is the fact that, even with professional facilitators, situations occur where five out of ten participants drop out. Kegan and Laskow Lahey openheartedly admit that 30-40% of the participants did not have a powerful experience with the exercise as it was formulated in the 2001 version (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009), but since the basic structure is the same in the new version, ethical issues undoubtedly remain.

Although a few of my students provided reasons for their decisions of non-participation, e.g., that personal experiences were no one else’s business or that they were involved in concurrent cognitive behavioral therapy, other students may have been uncomfortable with the exercise, but did not voice their objections. This possibility concerns me, both because of the hierarchical nature of the student-professor relationship and because voicing concerns about another person’s actions was one of the behaviors with which people had the most difficulty.

The result of my experience of putting the ITC process in practice leads me to question if all people are willing to do the exercise. Even Kegan and Laskow Lahey give a negative answer to this question. To answer whether all participants are willing to participate in self-reflective practices they state:

Almost none of them had any clue when they began the process of developing their X-rays that they were going to create a picture that would be so revealing – or intriguing – to them. If we had told them beforehand what they were going to produce, some might have declined to participate, and most might have been skeptical. (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009, pp. 46-47)

The quote appears in a section where the authors explain that the people they have coached are not unusual, they are all able to reflect when expected to participate in an ITC process. To me this quote illustrates some legitimate bases for objections. The ethical question is whether it is right to assign tasks that people might have refused to perform had they been adequately informed at the beginning. As researchers we are supposed to involve participants in an informed consent process where the participant is given adequate information and we make sure that true consent is given. Should our students not be treated with equal respect and ethics? A possible objection is that we as authorities have the power to assign tasks in the best interest of the students. But then the questions reappear in a new way: do we know that the exercise is in the best interest of the student? One answer is that to increase the future autonomy of a person, we must sometimes exercise authority that overrides the present autonomy in a pre-intervention

information process (Beauchamp & Childress, 2009). For example, in order to increase a person's ability to make better choices in life, information is needed. If the information is provided against the will of people, then their right to decide to access that information is currently overruled. The ethical justification for this paternalistic behavior is that the autonomy will be increased in the long run and produce a greater good. The problem is that this solution does not see or solve the challenge that providing the information changes the situation for every individual that is exposed to the new information. By its nature, information places a demand on people to do something with it.

A more intriguing question is whether all students and adults are able to participate in these kinds of practices. Kegan and Laskow Lahey state that the people involved in their sessions are not unusual people; instead, they report that their participants are "every kind of person you can imagine," but then admit that participants are primarily college educated middle class people from all over the world (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009, p. 45). In other words, they are part of professions that can afford to pay for consultants and do not for the most part include working class people. My interpretation is that their reports are not based on people who are (on average) at an earlier stage of development, since they have not worked with people at plain jobs which require less complexity in reasoning (Commons, 2007). In defense of Kegan and Laskow Lahey, they give two examples where they specify the level of development, one with a socialized mind and one with a self-authoring mind according to Kegan's classification (Kegan, 2003; Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009). But they do not comment on those 3-13% percent of people who have developed less complexity than the socialized mind (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009). What are the implications if not all participants are able to do the transformational training? Some people may have reached developmental limits due to factors like genetics and psychological damage earlier in life or cultural limitations (Commons, 2008). Individual development is affected by many influences: evolutionary, ecological, genetic, neural and hormonal, biomedical, nutritional, phenotypic, proximal and distal environmental influences that are all necessary but not sufficient to analyze a person, and it is a hard task to disentangle, predict and thus account for all influences (Wachs, 2000).

What's the Desired Outcome? Changing People or Organizations?

When the ITC process is used it is important to consider the desired outcomes. Is people's work with trying to dissolve their immunity to change a mutually agreed on desirable procedure? Does doing so serve the interest of the individual or the organization or both? In the ITC 2, the authors have expanded the exercise from an individual tool to an organizational device: "... the purpose of our work, however we went about it, was to grow the organization's ability to better deliver on its aspirations" (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009, p. 82). This could make the process more powerful (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009), but it could also increase the potential for two kinds of misuse. First, there is no inherent ethics built into the process, which means that it could be used to improve teamwork and thereby increase productivity for a company that destroys the environment. One solution of this is to make an ethical assessment before making the ITC available to a client company. Secondly, workers may be treated as means to a "greater" goal of increased productivity. There is quite a difference for people between signing up for self-improvement workshops in their spare time, and to be assigned to do something like the ITC because the employer decided that all workers need to improve their performance. One might

even go as far as questioning if this is “adult development” or manipulation? Is participation in the ICT process empowering or does it make participants more malleable with increasing their self doubt? In summary, many ethical questions are worth investigating in general and in process design.

Developmentally-aware leadership means that leaders need to be more patient and understand that change takes time (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009). This knowledge could be applied in all domains in life, and maybe there are better ways to be patient with co-workers, peers, students, and family. A complementary solution to the increasing mental demand of modern life, which seems to be invisible for some, is to adapt the workplace to people instead of changing people to adapt to workplace. Great parts of working life today require what Kegan calls a self-authoring way of meaning making in many cases (Kegan, 1994; Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009). This could be interpreted to mean there is a challenge to raise individuals to this level. Another way to consider this challenge is to ask the question: How can educational settings and workplaces change so that they make room for all kinds of people at the socialized order, the self-authoring order and the self-transforming order? The fact that organizations and companies require employees of higher levels of complexity (Kegan, 2004) is a challenging issue, because the costs are probably both individual and societal. And I do not think the solution of encouraging people to change and “develop” is either possible or an ethically-sound solution for all situations, because it will create expectations that are too challenging and over the heads for some.

I propose an analogy to support my points. If we have two ends in our hands, and we cannot make them meet, we can assume one is fixed and pull hard on the other or we can assume both are movable and try to bring them closer by pulling on both, or we can find a third piece that spans the gap between the two. If there is some problem in, for example, how workers “fit” into workplace organizations, and there is assumed to be only one solution, then it is possible to say that the organization refused to show flexibility (or growth or development) along the lines required by the workers. If a worker is not completing the piecework that flows along the assembly line, is it the “fault” of the worker, the “fault” of the assembly line organization of work process, the “fault” of the speed of the assembly line, or the “fault” of the employer who has assigned one worker so many tasks? Or does it indicate that there seem to be multivariate conditions that can account for a given situation, and how one sees it depends on one’s perspective. One motivating perspective is that employers want employees who can do certain things at given levels of complexity. Certainly one might hope that all people can develop to their full potential, but *that* that potential differs among people for numerous reasons needs to be considered (Commons, 2008).

The Mental Demands in and Assumptions of the ITC Process

The ITC is built on the key assumption (that I also share), that people do grow as adults, and even if it is often a slow process it is possible to further this development by adaptive and transformative exercises. The assertion is also that the ITC exercise actually can help people grow into new orders of complexity (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2009), but to what extent the ITC promotes transformation in orders of complexity is not yet clear. The primary follow up described by Kegan and Laskow Lahey is that people in organizations perceive themselves and others to be doing “better” on particular issues when they have used the process (Kegan &

Laskow Lahey, 2009). Kegan and Laskow Lahey do not provide results from any longitudinal studies that track changes over time to document the effectiveness of the method, and neither did I study that with my students.

A meta-review of 36 studies and over 12,000 participants showed that for a majority the developmental level stabilizes by early adulthood (Cohn, 1998). Individual development occurs, but little is known about it because most research has been performed on group data. A few studies have addressed the issue of promoting development among adults, and the results are mixed. Interventions to increase the ability to adopt a social perspective have been successful for children and adolescents, but in two studies “adults did not mature in response to role taking experiences or training experiences designed to increase one’s perspective taking and coping with inner conflict” (Cohn, 1998, p. 41). A few studies have succeeded in promoting development, but particularly few to postformal stages of development (Manners et al., 2004; Pfaffenberger, 2005; Ross, 2006; Torbert, 1994; Torbert & Fisher, 1992). According to Torbert, success factors for practices being developmentally effective are the following.

- (a) Voluntary engagement, (b) endurance over years, (c) guidance for participants by individuals who measure at later action-logics, and (d) research/ learning that integrates inquiry and action in the present moment (Torbert, personal communication in Ross, 2006, p. 41)

The ITC process does not live up to all these criteria. This does not preclude the possibility that for certain individuals the exercise will occur at just the right time to be a trigger for a transformational change. If the effectiveness of the process is going to be established, further research into its efficacy would need to be conducted. This, I recommend.

The Mental Demand of the Exercise

To be more specific, and to paraphrase Kegan himself, what are the mental demands of the ITC process (Kegan, 1994)? The ITC exercise consists of two parts, which puts different demands on people. Filling in the table requires a certain level of reflectivity about oneself and one’s actions; in addition, the participant must be able and willing to admit unfavorable aspects of oneself. The exercise is built on the requirement that all participants are able to use, at minimum, formal stage thinking. For example, it is not enough to blame others and make broad generalizations about others or self. To put items in the table requires at least formal stage reasoning because the persons need to see themselves responsible for the commitment (Kegan & Laskow Lahey, 2001a). An adequate understanding of personal responsibility is a formal stage concept which requires formal stage reasoning (Dawson & Gabrielian, 2003; Kjellström & Ross, 2009). In addition, it also requires the ability to present an antithesis of the argument when the counter commitment is identified. In summary, to do the ITC table of four columns requires systematic stage capacity to put formal relationships together coherently (Ross, personal communication, Nov. 30, 2009). In addition, it requires people to be able to reflect upon their emotions and have them as an object, in Kegan’s terms. The second part demands that participants observe their behaviors and interactions with others, which presupposes individuals have abilities to look at themselves from the perspective of another person.

An ITC Process on the ITC Process

What would happen if we performed the process on the process (see Table 2)? Multiple commitments are possible in a situation simultaneously, which means that others might come up with different first commitments, but this is my proposal. Thus, the objective of this thought experiment is to surface a possible underlying assumption of the process: in other words, on what sort of internally-presumed truth the process may rest on. As a starting point, we have to state a premise that there is an imaginary self (let us just call it “the ITC-itself”) that could be seen as the subject (in place of a typical person-participant); it represents the ITC performing its own process on itself. For the first step, the ITC-itself’s first commitment could be that positive adult development should be promoted because it is possible. In the second step, ITC-itself experiences that what interferes with this commitment’s goal are that people do not always change. In addition there is Kegan’s explicit commitment that increased mental complexity is necessary for people to adapt successfully to the environment, else they are “in over their heads.” The ITC-itself may assume that its design or explanations are inadequate to get intended results. In the third step, the ITC-itself identifies that its actions that undermine its first commitment (above) are using its steps with people that cannot or will not perform and use them. In reaction to that assessment, the counter commitment may be to not show or admit weakness in the ITC process because then the ITC-itself could no longer believe in its own effectiveness. A second possibility is that the ITC-itself would not admit the possibility that there will be those who simply do not change by using the ITC. That would challenge the primary assumption that people *can* develop by using the ITC.

Table 2. The ITC process on the ITC process

Commitment	Doing/not doing instead	Hidden competing commitment	Big assumptions
Adult development should be promoted.	To design the ITC in a way or explanation inadequate	To not show or admit weaknesses in the ITC process; To ignore those who do not change	Change to more mental complexity is always right and good.

My suggestion is that the ITC process is based upon the “big assumption” that change of mental complexity is always right and good. But this assumption is not “taken as an object” and discussed by its authors. Authors of the books express an awareness that sometimes people do not change. This “failure” to change is explained by recognizing that change is difficult, that it is a slow process, that it takes personal motivation, integration of thought and emotions, connection between mind and hand, and a supportive social context (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). However, the normative notions that change in complexity is good or the possibility that conditions may exist when it is not a good fit are surprisingly not considered or challenged.

The second part of the ITC process is to modify and test the major assumption. Doing so would, for example, include finding cases when it is not in the best interest of people to change. Persons in this category could be those who are on the first phase of a next level of development and in the process of translating their experiences, or people who are stuck in their current way of living and do not have the abilities and support as described above. An alternative assumption would be that some people also have reached the limits of their individual means of growing

meaning-making systems of higher complexity. This could mean that using the ITC process in a setting with such individuals will put further pressure on those individuals, possibly creating even more barriers to the possibility of a harmonious life. If this is the case and an underlying but now conscious assumption, we have a basis for considering the previous comments regarding ethics and the need to adapt workplaces and social structures to people's different ways of meaning making.

If my proposal of the ITC's "big assumption" is regarded as a compelling interpretation, and the implicit and invisible "big assumption" behind the ITC is spelled out and replaced by a conscious assumption of change being *sometimes* beneficial and possible, then the ethical road forward is to build this into the ITC process. Inspiration might come from the TIP process (Ross, 2006), which is constructed with the conscious underlying assumption that there are both people who benefit from change and those who do not.

Conclusion

The ITC process seems to be constructed on a major implicit assumption of change as always beneficial to all people. This is highly questionable, but regardless of the proof of its validity, several ethical questions remain that are not easily answered: Should students be required to go through this process? Should employees in a given workplace be required to do this? Should they be able to refuse to participate without fear of negative consequences? The proposal is that an ethical way of using the ITC process is to let participants be given a real choice of whether they want to take part in it or not. When the process is introduced in educational settings or at workplaces, it ought to be introduced as an entirely voluntarily practice. And when people have consented to involve themselves, their consent needs to be renewed continuously through the process.

It is possible to see Kegan and Laskow Lahey use of the ITC process as a primarily exogenous change devise, and a more ethical approach would be to use it as an endogenous process, where the change grows and is determined from within the individual. If the ITC process is to be used, it needs to be carefully introduced in a supportive environment with engaged and competent teachers who are willing to share and scrutinize their own assumptions about this exercise. Participants' developmental capacities for the complexity of performing the ITC may make its component parts impossible for some participants to complete. A great challenge is how facilitators can first ensure that their targeted participants are suitable for the process.

The relationships among participants, ITC facilitators, and the demands of the ITC process need to be scrutinized further. The ITC process requires at least systematic reasoning, where one can reflect on, compare/contrast, and discuss thoughts and feelings. Twenty-five percent is the highest commonly-estimated (in the adult development field) percentage of people in Western settings who can perform tasks at the systematic stage. Not all participants want to expend that effort or can. With a supportive facilitator, some people will be helped. Arguably more important, a skillful facilitator will be aware of subtle nuances across individuals in a group and lift demands from people who do not want to be part of an ITC process, or who may need an alternative, less challenging exercise.

The main conclusion is that inherent structures in the ITC process might produce some of the unintended results where people do not want to or cannot participate as a facilitator intends. If filling in the four columns requires systematic capacity to put formal relationships together, then abstract and formal stage participants, likely present in both the university student population and many workplaces, will probably be “in over their heads.” This represents an important area for further research in the field of adult development, education, and organizational development.

The proposal in this article is that what is missing in the ITC process is that adult “development” is not used *as a perspective on* the ITC process to pre-understand possible successes and failures. For example, in educational settings, it is an improvement if education is structured to promote mental complexity. But this means that not only must we be aware of students’ qualitatively different ways of learning, making meaning, and processing knowledge, but we must also take as a starting point people’s different levels of comprehension and construct different circumstances and experiences better tailored to these differences. Until we have sufficient information and the appropriate training to take this next step, we need to critically evaluate the use of transformational exercises and openly acknowledge the practical limitations, ethical matters and theoretical assumptions that they are based upon. An open creative dialogue on these matters is essential and I invite and request imaginative responses. The question for consideration by those using the adult development perspective now and in the future is how to deploy an ethical synthesis that coordinates two needs: using adult developmental methods on the individual level to help adapt people to the current societal systems they find themselves in, and using adult development insights to change societal structures to allow adults to evolve endogenously. Further research is indispensable not only on the effectiveness of educational designs and transformative exercises that claim to increase the level of mental complexity, but even more importantly, on how society and organizations can be structured to honor and respect people where they are.

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