20th Anniversary Essays
The Future of Teaching and Learning Social Innovation
By Warren Nilsson
Celebration. While the amount of suffering and need is genuinely overwhelming, giving does not need to be solemn. The more joyful it is, the more inspiring, collective, and engaging it can be, the more people will be encouraged to join and give whatever they can share. In the face of the world’s suffering and need, what is there to celebrate? Our capacity to make a difference together. Giving as a celebration—of each other, of resilience, and of possibility—without restraint, is one of the reasons to call this form of giving effusive altruism.

Collectivity. While it is essential that individuals have agency, what makes generosity powerful and even somewhat magical is that we do it together. Distributed, interconnected systems of people mirror some of the most functional, beautiful, and mysterious systems in nature—fungi, ant colonies, the extraordinary tapestry of tree roots, and the murmuration of starlings. In each of these systems, there is something about the whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. Scientists call this “emergence,” the idea that something happens between the parts of a system that then is a crucial part of what the whole does. People working collectively through their own generosity to improve the present and future is an essential part of effusive altruism.

Shared imagination. Social movements are based in the imaginative landscape that their participants inhabit together, conjuring a world that doesn’t exist yet and doing the work to build it collectively. In their book The Radical Imagination, Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish write that “the radical imagination ... is about transforming our social lives and relationships, transforming who and what we imagine are valuable, and transforming ourselves. We do this by building alternative social structures and institutions in our own lives.... The radical imagination exists in collective practice only.” Creating a shared imagination and effusive altruism are inextricable. They both depend on the collective, envision a world made better through shared humanity, accountability, and agency, and look at the past, present, and future not as disjointed periods in time, but as deeply interconnected ones.

How each of us expresses our generosity is not something to be judged or compared. Every expression of generosity is a manifestation of the human instinct to be a part of something bigger than oneself, to contribute to good. All of us, both within and beyond the social sector, must begin to look at generosity differently and holistically. It is always abundant, comes in many forms, and is every bit as critical to the human condition as love, friendship, or any of our other most treasured values. We have the opportunity to rewrite the story of generosity and help more and more people see themselves as playing an essential role in strengthening their communities and participating in social good.

The world we want to see tomorrow, in 10 years, and even in 100 years is being built by all of us now in the billions of small actions all of us take every day. Let us remember that a better, safer, and more equitable future depends not only on each one of us, but on each one of us together. Let that be our ultimate source of hope and optimism for the present and the future.

Notes
2 “From Scarcity to Abundance: Mapping the Giving Ecosystem,” GivingTuesday Data Commons, 2021.
The social innovation movement has converged around a powerful fivefold curriculum. This curriculum can go by many names and take many forms, but almost all social innovation learning is aimed at developing one or more of the following capacities.

**Systems awareness**, the art and science of paying attention to complex wholes, is in many respects the parent of social innovation. Its aim is to help groups not only see the hidden links and feedback loops in their systems but also to develop new connections and practices so that the whole system begins to see and interact with itself more fully.

**Shared leadership** practices explore questions like: How do we foster dialogue? How do we engage our diversity? How do we work with power in a healthy way? How do we make decisions together while also allowing for individual inspiration? Shared leadership involves micro-experiments in the ways we meet and manage and macro-experiments in the structures of collaborative governance.

**Cocreation** recognizes that social innovation depends less on creative people than on creative relationships. Its fundamental practice is appreciation—the process of revealing and elevating the strengths already inherent in people, organizations, and communities.

**Deep ecology** work retunes us to the reality that our human systems are not separate from our wider natural ecosystems. It strengthens our ability to learn from nature—biomimicry—and to love and connect to nature—biophilia. There is also an emphasis on making transparent our collective impacts, for good or bad, on the living systems we belong to.

**Generative purpose** orients the other four capacities toward an exploration of shared meaning. By framing purpose as a question and not an answer, it enables us to seek our deepest “whys” and helps us discover where we want to go together.

These five capacities have long been at the heart of social innovation learning, and academic research in the field of positive organizational scholarship consistently confirms the critical role they play.

Here’s the problem. None of these things is an individual capacity. By definition and reality, they are relational capacities. I can’t share power by myself. I can’t cocreate by myself. There is no ecology of “me.” And my own awareness of the system is of an entirely different order than the system’s awareness of itself.

The capacities needed to foster resilient systems simply don’t live in each of us separately. They live in the spaces between us where we meet, make, and decide, where we challenge each other and take care of each other, where we organize. Why then do we keep trying to teach collective capacities to individual leaders rather than teaching them directly to the collectives themselves?

**ORG SCHOOL**

Which brings us back to James Taylor’s funny idea of taking the collective, or the organization, seriously as the unit of learning. By “organization,” I mean not only formal organizations but also networks, associations, movement groups—anywhere people gather regularly to work toward a shared purpose. In the coming years, the social innovation movement will need to foster a new way of teaching and learning, one where the students are organizations and where the method involves a sustained course of collective study. We can call it Org School.

What can we say about Org School right now? To begin, we can learn from the spaces where people have been working directly with collectives for decades in the form of powerful system interventions like appreciative inquiry, Theory U, and open space, to name just a few. Although these interventions can be applied with any kind of change goal in mind, they are often used to catalyze social innovation. And they work. There is substantial evidence that these kinds of interventions, when embraced fully, can cause dramatic positive shifts in collective purpose, creativity, energy, and connectedness.

In that sense, we already know how to change systems, and there is much for Org School to draw on here in terms of engaging collective energies.

What happens next is the difficult part, though. Change is easy. Staying changed is hard. That’s where social innovation tends to run aground. A system change intervention will at best suggest a possibility. It can give us a glimpse of another way of being, but only briefly and often only within the scope of a specific initiative. Change efforts typically don’t have a robust memory function. So they catalyze movement, but struggle to nurture long-term learning. As an organization settles back into daily life, or as the leaders who championed a change initiative leave, the organization’s old habits return, even if disguised in new forms. We begin to repeat all the familiar blind spots, fears, and fatigue, and we are tempted by the soothing ease of stepping back onto what Roberto Unger calls the path of least resistance.

For some reason, we expect a change effort to be a kind of conversion, a peak experience that radically transforms everything once and for all. But learning rarely works that way. No one who wants to learn to play piano or to dance, for example, imagines that going on a weekend retreat or signing up for a six-month course will somehow turn them into a musician or a dancer. They know that their learning won’t be an intervention. It will be a practice, something that requires continued commitment and renewal to bear fruit. Learning social innovation is much the same, not a peak moment but long and patient work. As Bayo Akomolafe reminds us, “The times are urgent. Let us slow down.”

To create a lasting shift in an organization’s social innovation capacity, Org School would need to distinguish itself in at least four ways. First, unlike Leadership School, Org School’s learning activities would have to be distributed widely across the system at different times in different ways. It would be rare for all members to be involved in any one activity, so in order for the organization to be learning, as opposed to certain leaders or particular teams, the process would need many touch points. People would then have to knit the learning together by teaching their discoveries to each other. And this knitting would need to cut across status and power barriers, with secretaries teaching CEOs as often as the inverse.

Second, unlike conventional change interventions, most Org School learning would be embedded in the daily work of the organization rather than confined to special retreats. This is what would establish organizational memory and make the learning stick long after a “course” was over. Imagine a process like appreciative inquiry,
for example, taken up not just as a one-time initiative but as a way of holding employee evaluations or managing projects. Or imagine the deep listening associated with Theory U not simply as a feature of special sensing journeys, but as the regular dynamic of a board meeting or a budget process.

Third, organizations would learn together in cohorts. Imagine 10 social innovation organizations enrolling in a year-long course together, much the way that individual leaders do now. Through shared reflection and joint experimentation, the organizations would be more easily able to question and disrupt their own habits and cultures.

Fourth, Org School “teachers” would themselves be organizations. If social innovation wisdom and practice live not in us but in our relationships, then it is those relationships that should take the lead.

Many people and institutions are slowly beginning to experiment with social innovation learning approaches that hint at Org School. They might invite cross-sections of organizations into existing programs that were designed for individuals. They might offer coaching and accompaniment to organizations that are trying to structure a long-arc learning journey for themselves. These experiments can blend the strengths of Leadership School and Org School with the vitality of different change processes. But there remains vast scope for more ambitious and sustained experimentation.

The benefits of such experimentation could be extraordinary. In our own research, my colleagues and I have spent 20 years seeking out positive outliers in the social innovation landscape, organizations that are unusually gifted at reimagining the systems they are part of and that have managed to sustain that gift for many years. At first glance, the organizations that have been our greatest teachers don’t seem to have much in common. Some are small, some large. Some flat, some hierarchical. Some hip, some buttoned down. What does link them, though, is how much effort they put into developing the five social innovation capacities. And how reverent everyone is when they reflect on their experience.

People have told us over and over that in these organizations they are becoming the best versions of themselves. They are more courageous, more compassionate, more imaginative, more energized. Through profound daily practice, these organizations seem to bring their social innovation goals to immediate, tangible life in their hallways and meeting rooms. A longtime staffer at a Montreal food security organization told us “It creates a sense of possibility for a different way of being in the world together. It’s there right in front of you. You can’t argue that it can’t happen.” A member of an innovative youth development organization in Cape Town put it even more simply: “I think the magic of what we are trying to do is happening to us.”

In the organizations we have studied, that “magic” has been largely self-taught. They have not relied on Leadership School or frequent change interventions, and there was no Org School to help them. So they took the slow route, nurturing their collective capacities through trial and error and often a bit of luck. Some aspects of social innovation will always have to be self-taught, but there is no reason that Org Schools of all shapes and sizes can’t accelerate the learning, and ultimately the social innovation impact, of many more organizations.

The Org School journey is just beginning, and the invitation should be cast far and wide.

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**A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY**

**BY CRYSTAL HAYLING**

We are living through cataclysmic shifts: a global pandemic causing more than six million deaths; fires, famines, freezes, and floods; far-right gangs threatening poll workers and public-health officials; and threats to democracy everywhere. The world order appears to be unraveling.

Yet there are also monumental leaps forward that pundits and straight-line logic would not have predicted: The largest continuous civil rights protests in US history took place during the pandemic with all races and faiths proclaiming “Black Lives Matter”; the legalization of same-sex marriage in all 32 Mexican states; the rapid creation and distribution globally of effective vaccines against COVID-19; and the election and appointment of the first Black women as US vice president and US Supreme Court justice.

Given the scope of the challenges ahead and the possibility of creating real change, now is a powerful moment for us to discuss how philanthropy needs to change to meet the past and be an active force in bending history’s arc toward justice. There is no more room for business as usual. The people and planet are demanding that we build a vision for philanthropy, let go of practices that no longer serve us, and create new ones that move us forward.

**From extraction to regeneration.** Society’s obsession with metrics such as GDP (gross domestic product) reinforces the myth that eternal growth is possible, or even desirable. The seasons, by contrast, teach us the natural cycle of life and death. Reaping and sowing, and never taking more than can be replenished. We live on a planet that is capable of regrowth, so abundance is possible only if we limit our greed and invest in that which renews. Communities in the infamous Cancer Alley in the US state of Louisiana are fighting back against the fossil-fuel companies that insist on the false choice of jobs or clean air. Shouldn’t philanthropy be in the business of providing David a megaphone and at least a slingshot in the fight against Goliath?

**From individualistic to interconnected.** Having a great deal of money can be isolating, and perhaps that’s why so many wealthy donors hold tight to the illusion of the importance of self-sufficiency. Ironically, the way that traditional philanthropy is

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This call for change is deeply informed by the wisdom of Libra Foundation grantees, especially the Just Transition framework from Movement Generation.