

# Enabling transformational change: transforming the relational dimension

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - The purpose of this paper is to explore what is required to enable transformational change and, through this, different forms of social organisation for transformative action. The data is the author's lived experience of catalyzing transformational change processes in different (organisational and other) contexts. The paper intends to illuminate both the pattern of transformational change as well as the dispositions and capabilities of those leading the process, which can enable this pattern to be released. This is an approach which integrates spiritual practice, however defined, into social process in order to allow for the transformation of relationships and the release of systemic change. Actions in the system become transformative because they are relational. The work of transforming relationships requires paying attention to the dynamic of power as one shapes different forms of social organisation for transformative action.

**Design/methodology/approach** - A conversation-based approach was used to create deeper understandings of what is involved in releasing transformational change. The data is the author's lived experience of leading change processes over a period of time. The paper reflects on the use and value of different conceptual, social process and other frameworks which give life to a relational ontology and epistemology. Such frameworks are intended to enable transformational change through transforming the relational dimension as a basis for transformative action.

**Findings** - The paper supports the view that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' model or methodology to support transformational change. Therefore, the interpretive framework that was developed from inquiry into lived experience is not a normative one, but reveals rather the pattern of transformation and the dispositions and capabilities that enable the movement of transformational change. There is an 'integral' quality to these dispositions and capabilities: the distinction between spiritual and social practices is an essentially unhelpful one since the 'social' technologies for transformational change contain 'spiritual' practices, however defined. While the path of transactional change can be 'managed', the transformational path is one of structuring or designing in order to allow for emergence and creative responses at the level of the personal and the social. This path can only be enabled or facilitated, not managed or directed to a fixed outcome. The transformational process needs to be focused around shared practices and initiatives in order to promote transformative action in the world and to create a future that is just, prosperous and sustainable. However, this is not an 'outcomes-driven' approach, since the very nature of the transformational processes influences the concrete practices and relationships, through which transformative action in the world becomes possible.

**Originality/value** - The paper offers an in-depth reflection on lived experience of leading transformational change processes and develops an interpretative framework that could be used to inquire into other contexts. The paper offers insight into what is required to work with the dynamic of transformational change when there are multiple competing discourses, including around leadership, management and the 'management' of change. This is particularly relevant to faith-based and 'for purpose' organisations as they seek to respond creatively to changing contexts and to develop approaches and practices that are congruent with their core values and purpose and that form the basis for transformative action in the world.

**Keywords** - transformational change, transition, emergence, integrated spiritual and social process praxis, systemic change, power dynamics

## **1. Introduction**

In this paper, I explore the complexities associated with moving from a transactional path to catalysing or releasing the movement of transformational change. Through working with the data of my lived experience of catalysing transformational change processes in different contexts, I reveal a pattern of change and what might be required to facilitate its movement. This in turn reveals the ways in which working with transformational change can support the development of alternative forms of social organisation and an environment within which systemic change can be facilitated. This systemic change is towards creating alternative futures through transformative action.

The paper supports the view that those catalysing or leading change processes need to cultivate certain dispositions and capabilities (and associated practices) in order to accompany others on the journey of change and build their capability to lead such processes themselves. It also supports the view that the transformational process needs to be focused around shared practices and initiatives in order to provide the basis for transformative action in the world and, through these, to create a future that is just, prosperous and sustainable. This is not an outcomes-driven approach, since the very nature of the transformational process influences the shared practices and relationships, which forms the foundation for transformative action in the world.

### **What draws me to the work of transformational change?**

It came as a shock to me when I was given my first teaching assignment in 1976. I lived in Durban in South Africa, a predominantly English-speaking province, with Zulu the other main language. I'd been given a loan for my postgraduate teaching diploma and was therefore obliged to take whatever teaching position I was allocated. Teaching English as a second language in an Afrikaans high school was definitely not what I had in mind, particularly at a time when Afrikaans was seen as the language of the oppressor. The 1976 Soweto riots had made very clear the response amongst Africans to Afrikaans as medium of instruction. And here I was, committed to an anti-apartheid struggle, the only English-speaking person in 'enemy territory'! During the course of the next 6 years I had many of my stereotypes and assumptions both reinforced and deeply challenged. I was fondly referred to as 'the Communist' on the staff and our ideological differences were the source of many a heated discussion. I was also introducing students to radical literature written in English by Afrikaners who were challenging the status quo. I became increasingly interested in language - how it's acquired (from teaching it as a second language) and the power of language in bringing about changes in perception (from my experience of using language teaching as a vehicle for transformation). During the last two years of my teaching I completed an Honours in Applied Linguistics, which deepened this curiosity.

At the same time, my husband had been deeply involved in student politics and the anti-apartheid movement. The challenge of living in such different worlds with competing worldviews: the world of school and the dominant worldview of apartheid education on the one hand and the anti-apartheid struggle on the other,

gave me a very real experience of what it means to work with apparently irreconcilable difference at the same time as building relationship and influencing the way people think about and respond to a dominant ideology. Activist friends would question how I could be collaborating with the enemy, while at school I was asked to remove a 'Peaceful change now' sticker from my car, as it was subverting my students. In my final year of teaching at the school, my husband was detained on his way to dinner with a visiting British academic and put into solitary confinement for anti-apartheid activity. The response from staff and students (and their parents) deeply affected me. Almost my entire class (in their final year of school) came to spend time with me on the first weekend of his detention to make sure I was not alone and that all was well, fully sanctioned by their parents. Friends and colleagues on the staff remained close and helped me navigate this difficult time. And, at the same time, many English-speaking friends and family were judgmental – and absent. I built some lasting friendships with both students and colleagues.

When I took on a position in the department of Applied Linguistics at the university in the following year, I was sitting with a number of questions, which have continued to inspire me and inform my practice and which I will explore further during this paper. One of the core questions, which is relevant to the purposes of this paper, is: ***What does it take to build relationships and connections across seemingly insurmountable divides?*** In the journey of transformational change, one can never assume the same starting points, shared assumptions or shared values and beliefs. It is the journey of change that enables this diversity to be surfaced and engaged with as part of building relationships and shaping shared purpose as we respond creatively to our contexts.

## **2. Methodology**

I was requested by the Susanna Wesley Foundation to write an account of some of the work on transformational change which I've led in different contexts; a reflection which draws together spiritual and social processes. Preparation for this paper involved a number of phases. The first was an annotated narrative, which captured my lived experience of catalyzing change processes in different contexts and the thinking and practice(s) which informed this work. This was read by a friend/colleague from Australia who with social processes for transformational change, particularly in the social services and disability sectors. She served as learning partner and she and I had a conversation, which surfaced the pattern of transformation from my narrative. This pattern became the organising framework for reflection.

The next iteration formed the basis for conversation with a colleague with whom I've co-authored papers on the complexities of establishing a Leadership Centre at a university in South Africa. The writing of the paper was therefore supported by a relational, conversation-based approach. It became clear during the drafting of the paper that the separation between spiritual and social process is an artificial one, and that the practices and dispositions that support the work of leading transformational change have an integral quality and reflect an integral spirituality.

As a practitioner and from a social process perspective I've been influenced by the early work of Peter Senge around systems thinking and building learning organisations (Senge 1990) and the evolution of that work into Presencing (Senge et al 2004). The book introduces the idea of “presence”—a concept borrowed from the natural world that the whole is entirely present in any of its parts—to the worlds of business, education, government, and leadership. In researching for the book, the authors found that we as humans often remain stuck in old patterns of seeing and acting. They claim that by encouraging deeper levels of learning, we create an awareness of the larger whole, leading to actions that can help to shape its evolution and our future.

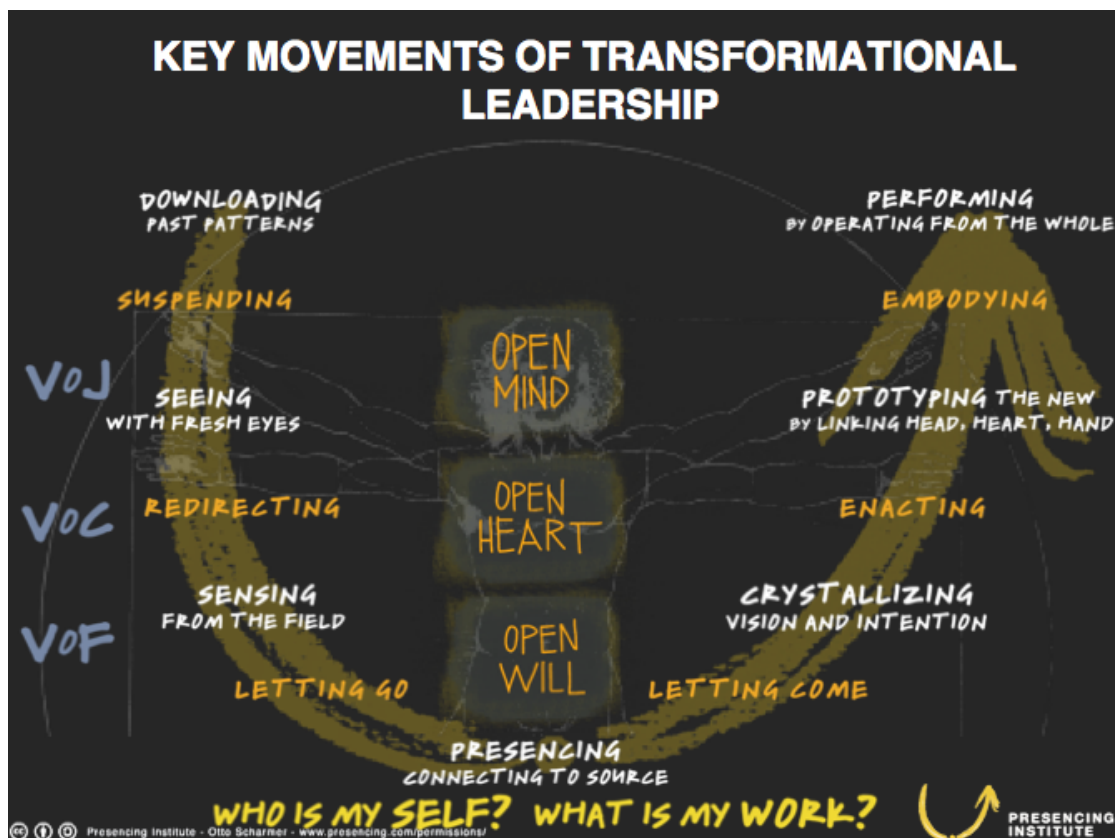


Figure 1: Key Movements of Transformational Leadership<sup>1</sup>

The work of Otto Scharmer around Theory U as framework for both navigating and understanding transformational change (Scharmer 2009) is a continuation of this project. My participation in the global Presencing Institute practitioner circle has both deepened my practice as social process professional and also enabled a profound connection between my faith and my spiritual practices and my work as social process advisor and professional. The work of building ‘containers’ (physical and social spaces for transformational change) requires such personal integration. *Figure 1* captures both the movement of transformational change and the personal and collective leadership required to facilitate this movement (a ‘U journey’).

Therefore, the literature cited in this paper reflects what has informed and continues to inform my own personal journey of navigating and nudging change and co-creating new forms of social organization, and is not intended as a

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.presencing.com/>

literature review or to be definitive of either the literature on transformational change or the theological and spiritual literature that links to this. They reflect the growth of discernment and effectiveness in my own practice of facilitating transformational change. My practice as social process professional and the disciplines and practices which support this work (including spiritual practices) are becoming increasingly aligned and mutually informing and draw from similar ontological understandings<sup>2</sup> about an ever-unfolding universe in an ongoing evolutionary movement (Delio 2013; Edwards 1999, 2006); de Chardin 1969, which we come to know through transformational encounter with the human and non-human world. The informing epistemology<sup>3</sup> then is that all knowing is best understood as transformational encounter in relationship (see for example, Esther Meek, 2011). Parker Palmer (1993:21) describes the link between a relational ontology and epistemology:

The shape of our knowledge becomes the shape of our living; the relation of the knower to the known becomes the relation of the living self to the larger world.

What is meant by relationship in the context of this paper is what anthropologist Marilyn Strathern refers to as 'The Relation' (Strathern 1995). She reminds us that at the heart of systems are persons dealing with one another, the systems they create for themselves being second-order manifestations of their primary human ability to make relationships. Therefore, the concept of relation can be applied to any order of connection. It is 'holographic' in the sense that the whole is entirely present in each of its parts and each part contains information about the whole. There is therefore nothing either large-scale or small-scale about the person. The unit of analysis is relationship and sets of nested relationships, which include, but are not confined to, human relationship.

Attentiveness to social relations, which include both principles of social organisation and also interactions between persons, is at the heart of the work of facilitating transformational change. However, the concept 'relation' is not limited to human relationship, since it works at multiple levels of scale. Enabling deep connection with the non-human world through solo time in nature is another dimension of relationship that is fostered. Relationship with the non-human world is also fostered through connecting with practices and rituals of indigenous peoples in relation to the natural world and to the land. Relation also refers to connection with greater purpose and with God, however one conceives this relationship.

The methodological approach that underpins this paper is therefore one that gives life to this relational ontology and epistemology. This is founded in the belief that transformational change is effected through transformative encounter and transformed relationships, not through driving for particular outcomes.

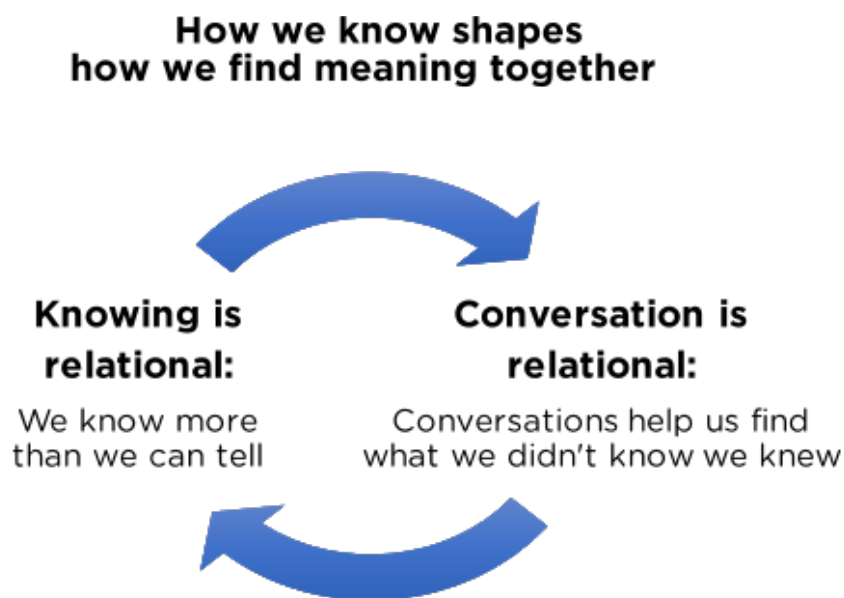
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<sup>2</sup> **Ontology** is the philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology>

<sup>3</sup> What is the nature of the knower? What is the nature of the known? And what is the relation between the two. This is the discipline called **epistemology**. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology>

Transformative actions are transformative precisely because they are relational. Knowing in relationship releases a different kind of knowing: a 'dispositional' knowing, rather than propositional knowledge, one which taps into the tacit dimension (Polanyi 1996). Frameworks that build a relational field of awareness, including dialogue (Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1999) and conversation-based approaches, are central to the work of transformational change.

Figure 2 shows how meaning unfolds in relationship, and the essentially relational nature of conversation as the vehicle for this unfolding. This understanding of how to lead people in a transformational process is also reflected in Figure 3 (based on Strom 2014).



*Figure 2: Relational dimension of coming to know through conversation*

The lived experience that is reflected on in this paper does not consider transformational change as an end in itself; transformative encounters enable new forms of social organisation, which in turn provide the basis for transformative action in the world. This process of transition from transformative relationship through different forms of social organisation to transformative action requires discernment and facilitation. The relational shift from what has been called an egocentric perspective (which is focused on the individual) to an ecocentric one (which is concerned with the person in broader relationship to the human and non-human world) (Scharmer 2009; Clarke 2012), inevitably involves paying close attention to the dynamic of power as we are working with uncertainty and outside fixed methods and frameworks. This dimension is often underplayed in the literature around transformational change. A focus on the dynamic of power is necessary as it the (sometimes unwitting) exercise of power that breaks relationship and inhibits the movement of transformational change because competing interests and belief systems remain unsurfaced and cannot therefore be used as a generative resource. Figure 3 (based on Strom 2014) reflects this shift from working with certainty (and certain knowledge) to a conversation-based

approach that evokes a relational knowing and which generates questions and co-inquiry.

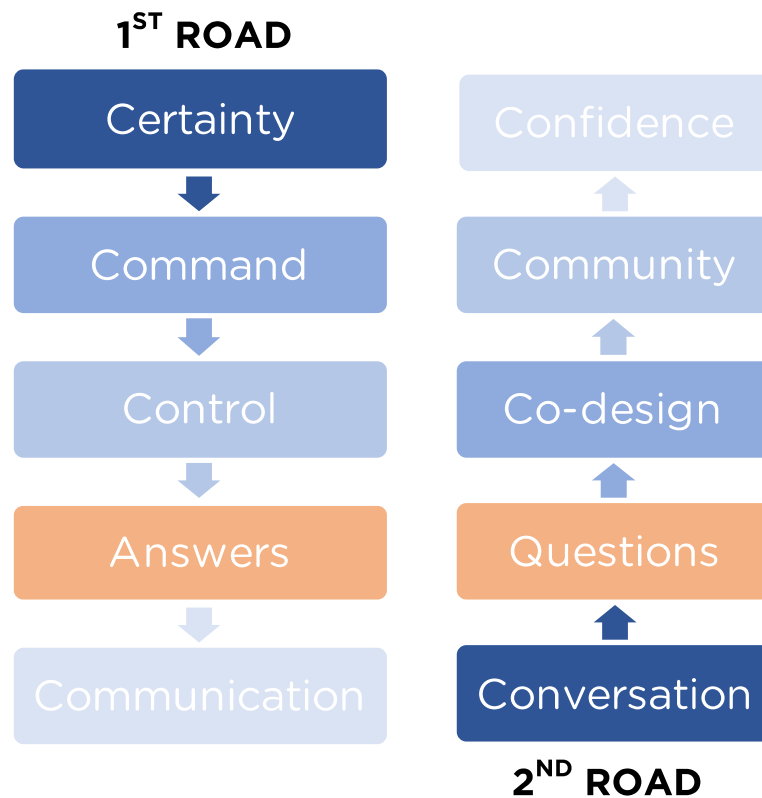


Figure 3: Learning in relationship: From certainty to community

The shift from 1<sup>st</sup> road to 2<sup>nd</sup> road is one of relationship: learning in relationship needs to be a focus of leading. And helping loosen attachment to certainty and to preconceived solutions is core to leading transformational work. Paying attention to the relationship between content and process to ensure that expertise/specialist knowledge is drawn in as appropriate and doesn't interrupt the movement of transformation through the exercise of power.

Therefore, a further informing framework has been used that looks at issues of power and is concerned with the complexities of social organisation. This has been termed "phronetic organisation research" (Flyvbjerg 2006). Phronesis is defined as that activity by which "instrumental rationality is balanced by value rationality" and which therefore provides the necessary condition for social organisation (Flyvbjerg 2006: 371). Flyvbjerg suggests that developmental research informed by this focuses on a number of value-relational questions about the processes, purposes and desirability of change. The main objective of phronetic research is to seek to bring understanding and meaning to values, interests and power relations as a basis for praxis. Research adopting this approach studies organisations and organising with a particular emphasis on power and values:

[...] sometimes to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to generate new perspectives and always to serve as eyes and ears in ongoing efforts to understand the present and to deliberate about the future (Flyvbjerg 2006: 374).



### **3. Revealing the pattern of transformation: towards an emerging framework**

In this section, I explore different dimensions of my lived experience over time and the pattern of transformation that has emerged from this experience. In each sub-section I begin by describing lived experience in a context, and follow this with a reflection (in relation to that lived experience) on what is involved in facilitating transformational change.

#### **3.1 An initiating pattern: Uncovering intention or purpose**

In 1982, I was an academic in the Department of Applied Linguistics at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in Durban, South Africa. One of my core teaching roles was a year-long course in Communication and Health Care in the university's School of Medicine as part of the Community Health department's offerings. The school had been established to educate African doctors to serve in under-served areas and did not admit white students until after the first democratic election in 1994. Therefore, I had 120 first year students from diverse ethnic backgrounds and language groups.

The reality of apartheid education meant that African, Indian and so-called coloured students had had little contact with one another at school and came from very different educational and cultural backgrounds. The purpose of the course was not only to explore the complexities of communication and health care in the South African context, but also to enable students to come to understand one another's backgrounds and worldviews and to learn to work across these differences.

This work enabled me to explore some of the questions I'd brought with me from teaching at the Afrikaans high school. It also exposed me to the richness of cultural and social understandings that these students brought with them, understandings which were completely ignored in the content-based curriculum that they were taken through in their four undergraduate years of study. The language that was used to categorise the African students in particular ('under-prepared', 'disadvantaged', 'second language', *etc.*) did not address the underlying issues. The problem of students' failure to flourish was seen to be primarily a problem with students (and African students in particular), not a problem with the curriculum or with the 'system'. Therefore 'language' remedies were cast as the solution, with limited impact. This realisation over time led to a 6-year experimentation with curriculum transformation with the faculty and involving the Faculty Board, with my role being in facilitation and educational development. This culminated in a 10-week integrated curriculum in each of the four undergraduate years of study, which was learning and inquiry-based, community-based, and problem-based.

This 'bounded innovation' was followed by a 3-year curriculum transformation initiative in the Faculty of Architecture and Allied Disciplines. I had since moved from Applied Linguistics into the Department of Higher Education and was fully committed to educational development work. These bounded innovations were

giving substance to the university's strategic intention to become a 'learning organisation'. I learned the hard way the relationship between structure and agency, and the need to clearly define one's domain of interest and influence. At the same time as being involved in this faculty-based transformational work, I was invited to lead a university-wide facilitator group, comprised of academics from across the university and with the intention of taking 'the university' on this journey. When it came to working at an institution-wide level there was no real common interest or hook, nor was the notion of building a learning organisation anyone's 'business'. There was no shared guiding purpose for the work. On the contrary, while some heads of schools/faculties found the concept an interesting one, the majority resisted the notion that organisations can learn and could not understand the reason for change. Resistance became the response to the invitation to change. Connecting the faculty-based innovation and enabling learning and scaling across - and reporting this work in broader decision-making forums- had far greater impact across the institution than attempts at university-wide transformation.

### **Facilitating transformational change: paying attention to the relational dimension**

I interpreted my role in the faculty as creating a learning environment which benefited all those in the faculty: teachers, learners and the entire teaching and learning process/curriculum more broadly conceived. The concern with how to create a learning environment that was inclusive and redressed past imbalances in the apartheid education system was a shared one at a university-wide level. The recognition that previous disadvantage was being reinforced by a 'first world' medical curriculum that did not take account of diversity and of local context was also a shared one. This acknowledgement was given further stimulus by the national medical association's commitment to producing lifelong learners, able to respond to the South African context.

This faculty-based work was taking place at a time when the university had its stated strategic intent to become a learning organisation, influenced by the work of Peter Senge and his associates at MIT (Senge 1990); my role in educational development was to give substance to that intent. My role was not to lead these processes, but to help create the conditions, and provide the stimulus and some scaffolding for change. What the concepts and practice of the learning organisation (and the fifth discipline of learning organisations - systems thinking) enabled was attention to the relational dimension and sets of nested relationships and systems:

Firstly, at a **governance level** in order to influence decision-making. This required close work with the Dean of the Medical School and with the Faculty Board, who mandated an 'education review group' comprised of key staff in the faculty to work with me to ensure that we understood the strengths of the current curriculum before seeking to change it. This group expanded as we experimented with aspects of the curriculum and drew other faculty members into the design process. This experimentation also involved linking with medical schools

internationally to explore what had been done elsewhere. Some of this experience has been documented (Frame & Seneque 1991).

Secondly, at the level of **curriculum content** (since this was the core work of the faculty) in order to shift how teachers and learners engaged with content. The Education Review Group experimented with different organising principles for the curriculum before agreeing to an integrated 10-week learning/inquiry-based and community-oriented, problem-based program, with tuberculosis (TB) being the first program. We agreed that loosening the hold of a content and discipline-based program was necessary to enable students to engage meaningfully with material. This was informed by research and practice of problem-based Medical curricula internationally (see Connolly & Seneque 1999). The setting for this was shifted: the first session involved staff and students all visiting a rural public health facility and travelling together in local transport to visit TB sufferers in their homes. This opened a relational and affective knowing that set the context for content-based knowledge. We converted an area of the medical faculty into an open learning space out of the lecture hall, with small groups in circles round a flipchart as they engaged with the problem that had been designed for that session.

Thirdly, at the level of **relationship between teaching and learning processes** (and, therefore, teachers and learners) in order to allow for a diverse group of learners to fully participate in the learning process. Teachers had not previously paid attention to how to facilitate learning on the part of a multicultural, multilingual student population. Building capability to facilitate problem-based learning in small groups not only empowered students to engage meaningfully with content (in real contexts), but was also an empowering experience for staff as they released control of the learning experience and observed students flourishing. This opportunity for mutual learning, where students could surface the way they were engaging with course content through engaging with particular problems allowed teachers to build relationships with students (and with other staff) that didn't relate only to course content and included students sharing their experience of using traditional healers (or *sangomas*). Thus, propositional knowledge and relational or dispositional knowing were brought together, providing for a transformative experience. Aspects of this experience have been captured (Connolly & Seneque 1999).

This experimentation in the system enabled the realization that the problem that needed to be addressed was a systemic one, and the question shifted from: 'How can we solve the problem of disadvantaged students by 'fixing' their language and academic literacy skills?' to 'How can we maintain the strengths of a world class curriculum at the same time as creating a learning environment for a diverse group of students that is relevant to the South African context?'

In my academic role, doing developmentally-oriented research, I had been influenced by the early work of Peter Reason about doing research *with* rather than *on* people (Reason 1981), and his subsequent work in action research (Reason & Bradbury 2008). I was also impacted by the work of Stephen Toulmin and

others on bringing about change in organisations through participation, and the role of action research and other developmental research in this process (Toulmin & Gustavsen 1996). The orientation of such research is always a relational one, based in the belief that the research and developmental processes themselves enable transformational change. They create a developmental context within which transformational relationships become possible. This remains an informing framework for my practice.

### **3.2 Discovery: gaining knowledge about the system/experiencing the system**

In 2007, I gained real insight into what it means to immerse oneself in a system and to accompany people as they transition – in this case from high levels of conflict to a post-conflict society (and all of what that could mean) – when I spent a year working in what was then southern Sudan.

I had connected with Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Sydney and had been offered the position of National Education Coordinator with JRS in southern Sudan. For me, this meant bringing together spiritual practice and social processes with a focus on social justice in the context of post-conflict reconstruction and development. My only specific instruction from the Jesuit who was Regional Director of JRS, based in Nairobi, was not to go in with answers, but rather to immerse myself in people's contexts.

The strong focus on *accompanying* refugees and internally displaced people as they sought to craft lives of dignity and build resilience in post-conflict circumstances had a profound impact on me. Accompaniment often meant that I mediated between local education projects (all staffed by refugees and IDPs) and the reporting demands from the Rome office – all in logframe format (traditional reporting in terms of goal, outcomes, outputs and activities) – built on the assumption that what was reported in this form reflected reality on the ground in any way. A journey of accompaniment is not one driven by the rational logic and linear thinking of logframes. The experience of working with one of our project staff to accompany a member of the team who had just lost her home, provoked us to write a piece for the JRS newsletter:

Transition is not a simple movement from point A to B. It is not primarily a rational process; it is one that involves our life experiences and all of who we are as human beings (Yoasa & Seneque 2007).

It is the relational dimension and transforming relationships in community that is key to enabling transition.

The question of how to build relational accountability and notions of community wellbeing in the context of international development has guided a current long-term project with Edmund Rice International (ERI), the agency within the Christian Brothers' community responsible for bringing rights-based approaches into their work of international development (including education). A number of the brothers had experience of Theory U and an understanding of the value of participatory and more emergent approaches to planning, which is why they approached me to partner with them. They are challenging needs-based approaches to community development and introducing a rights-based approach

as a basis for transforming communities. They are also seeking to get underneath the rhetoric and limitations of individual rights and entitlements, and to surface community and communal rights through deeply engaging with local communities.

My role has been to work with the agency to bring social process, program design and facilitation capability to their human rights and social justice advocacy work in Africa. While those leading social justice advocacy desks need to account for the impact of their work, this project enables them to do transformational work in local communities and account for this well and to situate this work in logframes for reporting purposes. While the intention of the work was to build capability for participatory monitoring and evaluation across the continent, the process of co-designing and co-facilitating workshops in Kenya and South Africa has led to a regional prototype. Therefore, the project is culminating in a workshop in Zambia in October this year, involving advocacy coordinators across southern Africa (South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe) to lead the work of social justice advocacy across the region, in the context of a jointly held vision and strategic plan to realise that vision. This final workshop reflects an evolution of thinking and practice: the focus is no longer only on monitoring & evaluation; its intention is to create an African manual from local case studies and local practices in order to provide a model of community-led human rights programs that can teach the 'global north'. It is also to build local capability in leading transformational change and creating social and community organisation in order to sustain this work.

### **Facilitating transformational change: paying attention to the relational dimension**

The transition from immediate post-conflict settings to the ongoing reconstruction and development of civil society is a complex one. Reconstituting relationships at many different levels is a critical part of the process. Transformational relationships are key to creating a developmental context, in which the more traditional planning and reporting frameworks can be situated. If this developmental process is not initiated, logframe and other transactional procedures can drive the agenda and unwittingly undermine people-centred development initiatives. My role required me not only to work with the staff in four projects across the country as they continued to provide education and peace-building more broadly to their local communities, but also to build relationships with key people in the Ministry of Science, Education & Technology (MoEST) to ensure that what was learned in the projects was transferred and capability built. With few exceptions all staff were local, including project directors.

The experience of immersing myself in the local context and learning from our staff as they accompanied internally displaced people and returning refugees was essential. The understanding of context as dynamically constituted through human relationship draws on Chaiklin and Lave's understanding of "context as situated activity" (1996: 17). They contend that:

[...] meaning is not created through individual intentions; it is mutually constituted in relations between activity systems and persons acting, and has a relational character [...] Context is not so much something into which

someone is put, but an order of behaviour of which one is part (1996: 18).

This also means that community is relationally constituted and is not a static construct or 'product'. I was constantly reminded that there were no easy solutions and that many of the 'solutions' offered by international aid agencies were non-systemic, often fragmented, and served to divide rather than build community. However well-intended, 'technical' support that doesn't take account of local community dynamics and local context interferes with these dynamics and skews local power relations. Building strong relationships amongst those leading the four projects became my priority, so that they themselves became a learning community/community of practice as they supported one another in developing educational programs that were local and relevant and built a sense of community, at the same time as fitting with the MoEST national curriculum. While the work of reporting and accounting for spending of grant money was a necessary part of their role, it often distracted them from their core purpose.

My role then became one of mediating with the regional office in Nairobi and the international office in Rome to ensure that the realities projects were facing (where at times there were no school buildings and quality education was being delivered) were not only acknowledged, but accommodated. Funding was allocated for regular gatherings of those leading projects, and learning exchanges across the four projects so that those working in specialist areas could learn from one another and deepen their practice (e.g. in girl child education, psychosocial support, etc.). This helped build confidence and coherence across the projects and gave a position of strength to start engaging in open exchange and partnering with staff at MoEST. A strong human development approach informed this work of creating capabilities, underpinned by holistic understandings of wellbeing. Capabilities so conceived are not "just abilities residing in a person but also the freedom of opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social and economic environment" (Nussbaum 2011: 20).

Traditional needs-based approaches assume a relatively static rather than contextual notion of community. The commitment on the part of the Christian Brothers is to a relational approach that builds community through the process of engaging. I had worked with one of the ERI staff in the context of Catholic Earthcare Australia, and the idea of an integral ecology as informing framework, supported by Theory U as an alternative to traditional planning frameworks was what guided us. We had also both been influenced by the work of Ilia Delio (Delio 2013). She works with the writings of Teilhard de Chardin (1969), who suggested that the evolutionary process, with its orientation towards unity, complexity and consciousness, is driven by the fundamental energy of love. Delio suggests that love is the means by which global wholeness will emerge. Both of these evolutionary frameworks provide an experience of participatory and emergent approaches to development work and to understanding the impact of the work on enabling local communities in naming and claiming their own rights.

### **3.3 Conversion: a radical shift in the way of thinking, seeing and being**

The experience at an Afrikaans high school, which I describe in the opening paragraphs, was a significant conversion experience for me. Over a period of 6 years I had been immersed in a work environment that was informed by a particular worldview and ideology, while in my personal life all those I had relationships with held a very different worldview and competing ideology. I had to hold my own in response to our activist friends who questioned how I could be 'collaborating with the enemy' and why I hadn't resigned from my teaching. Learning how to hold my own and holding these strongly conflicting and divergent realities, at the same time as building lasting relationships in the workplace, has shaped my personal and professional life. Notions of 'good' and 'bad' and 'moral high ground' were eroded by this experience. Despite often deep ideological differences and difference in language and culture, the school community in all its dimensions rallied to support someone they believed to be one of 'theirs'. The pillars of my worldview had been tested. Through this experience I had learned how to move between different (and potentially conflicting) worldviews and belief systems. This navigating between worldviews was not a case of being 'neutral' or 'detached', but of being deeply connected to my own beliefs at the same time as understanding those of others **and** building relationship. This profound experience initiated an ongoing passion for transformational work.

My work with ecotheologian, Denis Edwards, in the context of Catholic Earthcare Australia, gave me a visceral experience of the ways in which social processes can provide the conditions for ecological praxis (Edwards 2007).<sup>4</sup> My experience in 2013 of hosting a gathering of Catholic schools in South Australia to explore what ecological conversion might mean for schooling deepened my practice. Partners working in the space of 'natural resource management' were also present. Denis Edwards brought the perspective of ecotheology into the conversation (Edwards 1999, 2006) and Paul Clarke brought the importance of place and deeply listening to place (Clarke 2012), while my understanding of social process helped me build the container and helped us hold the space for a transformational journey for over 100 participants. The hosting team within the Catholic Schools Office designed the two-day process and also held the overall space. The subsequent issuing of the papal encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home* (2014), which calls for an integral ecology, has further strengthened this call to transforming relationships at all levels: the social, cultural, economic and environmental in order to create a more just, prosperous and sustainable world.

#### **Facilitating transformational change: paying attention to the relational dimension**

What I learned from this experience is that the radical shift in perspective that conversion suggests can only come about through transformative encounter. In

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<sup>4</sup> Denis Edwards talks about ecological praxis as "not only a radical reorientation of thought, and it is not only the discovery of a new capacity for feeling for nonhuman creation. It is both of these issuing forth in personal, political and ecclesial action" (2007: 112).

the case of the high school, for me, it was encounter with a very different belief system and worldview – one which had significant impact, not only at a personal level, but also socially and politically. It would have been easy for me to continue to vilify the Afrikaner as the enemy and responsible for all the ills of apartheid. However, the relationships that were forged both respected and transcended such difference and allowed us to accommodate potentially conflicting belief systems, without wanting to ‘change’ the other.

The movement of transformational change requires the capacity to accommodate multiple perspectives. It also needs to allow for new perspectives to emerge and become assimilated as part of the process of transformational change. Creating the conditions for shifts in perspective to happen and new perspectives to emerge in community was the purpose of the South Australian ecological conference. The 2-day process was designed as a ‘U journey’ to take 100 participants on a journey of ecological conversion: the shift from an egosystemic to an ecosystemic way of seeing and being (Clarke 2012, Scharmer 2009).

The content threads of ecotheology and place-based learning, or learning from and through nature, were held in a broader container for co-inquiry. Dialogue walks and solo time in nature were a key part of the process, as was collective music and movement. The process of ecological conversion was modeled through the design and facilitation of the two days. Input and stimulus for conversation was provided and conversation held between myself, Denis Edwards, Paul Clarke and others who spoke of their local experience of building ecological praxis. This was followed by conversation at tables, framed around questions relating to: What have you heard? What questions are evoked? How is theology in conversation with ecological issues? What does this mean for me? What does this mean for us? The movement of the 2 days followed the U journey, concluding with conversation in diverse groups around the practical implications of ecological conversion and ecosystemic practice.

### **3.4 Presence: being fully present and open to emerging possibilities**

In 2002, I was working on building ‘communities of practice’ in the corporate sector in Australia. Our local parish priest in Manly (in Sydney, Australia) asked me why we couldn’t build ‘communities of transformation’ that enabled people to explore their faith more deeply. We formed a small group who read extensively and, over a period of some time, experimented with various forms of small groups (including more traditional needs-based/like-with-like small groups). It became clear to us that the substantive part of the program needed to be specifically about Catholic identity (and not simply small groups as an end in themselves as the vehicle for forming community). I wasn’t deeply familiar with *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and I dived in and selected excerpts to explore in our weekly meetings. Most of my time was spent discerning questions that would guide conversation in small groups. For example, The Catechism opens with the following: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (n. 27).



This formed the opening conversation. The 10-week conversation- and inquiry-based exploration of the Catechism attracted 80 people (Catholic and non-Catholic, from the ages of 19 to 89) into non-facilitated small group conversation around what it means to live an adult faith, beyond dogma.

### **Facilitating transformational change: paying attention to the relational dimension**

The process revealed the transformative power of questions and conversation to explore religion and faith, not as ideology and from the basis of certainty, but as the basis for spiritual co-inquiry. People were deeply present to relationship at all levels - with themselves, with one another, and with God - as they made sense together of what it means to lead a faith-filled life, drawing deeply from their own experience. My role was simply to create and hold the space for the movement of transformation to occur in relationship. This experience reinforced my belief in the power of conversation in provoking conversion and the relationship between conversation, risk and conversion as the basis for transforming community. Cowan & Lee (1997: 2) note that

It is no etymological fluke that conversation and conversion have the same Latin roots from which we have pressed both words into English. Throughout our lives our conversations change us, move us, and often convert us. The root connection between conversion and conversation is more than fun with words. The etymological connection tells some important truth. It tells us a story about our humanness. And our divinity.

Because of the context which had been created, people were prepared to risk themselves in conversation and become vulnerable in relationship. The process revealed the power of authentic dialogue for building faith-filled community. It also revealed the value of diversity: in age, gender, educational and cultural background. This was not a group of like-minded people, but rather a diverse group who deeply engaged in a process of discernment about something of profound importance to them. Community is not about creating homogeneity or about 'product', but rather about deeply connecting around core anchor points of value in order to allow a deep experience and expression of that diversity.

Presence is always about discernment. Ilia Delio (2013) describes the evolutionary movement that being present allows: the movement of contemplation is always a deepening of presence at the same time as a leaning into the future. In the language of Theory U, presence is described as the moment of connecting to Source and shifting from the small-self to the large-self I (Scharmer 2009). It is through being fully present (in the present moment) and connecting to something larger than ourselves that we are able to sense and lean into the future together. This is the process of conversion: a deep inner knowing and shift in perception from which change in ways of being and doing follows. Richard Rohr (2009) talks about the necessary movement of transformation from order-disorder-reorder and notes that all great spirituality teaches about letting go of what you don't need and who you are not. This is supported by the work of Walter Brueggemann (2002), who uses the Psalms to point to the movement of faith and describes the ongoing movement of transformation from secure orientation through disturbing disorientation to surprising reorientation. This movement is captured in the U

journey as a necessary 'letting go' in order to allow for the emergence of new ways of knowing and personal and collective insight ('letting come').

It is the role of facilitation to keep people in a non-reactive space/in a state of presence and to provide a container to hold the movement to reorientation. This helps enable the shift from an egocentric perspective to an ecocentric one. This movement always happens in the moment of transformational encounter. Martin Buber (2010) refers to this covenantal relationship as an I-thou relationship. Creating the conditions for generative dialogue is necessary to release the pattern of transformation, as is building capability for dialogue and generative conversation (Bohm 1980, 1996).

### **3.5 Generation of new meaning or revelation**

While I was in southern Sudan, the friend/colleague I'd worked with on the Catechism program been appointed Director of Catholic Earthcare Australia, an agency which had been established by the Catholic Bishops Conference in 2002 with the mandate of bringing about an 'ecological conversion' across the Catholic Church in Australia. What has since been named an 'integral ecology' (Papal encyclical 2015) was making clear a way of bridging the human and natural sciences and the various faith traditions and opening a path for transformative action in the world. This seemed to me to be an opportunity to integrate a way of being, thinking and acting in the world and impact across a significant 'system' in Australia (with schools, universities, social services, hospitals, and health services). I worked with the Director and the then Chair of Earthcare, a bishop with an observatory in remote NSW, to write a concept note which drew the best of the human and social science (and theological and spiritual) understandings of how to create a human and social ecology aligned with natural science understandings of ecological systems and the need to care for the earth.

It was very clear that the agency would remain a small one and that the design task was one of building leadership capability in Catholic schools and agencies across the country to lead these processes in their own context. A significant bringing together of the insights from my work with shifting complex systems was in the design, development, and delivery of the Animators for Sustainability Program - a leadership formation program for those leading Catholic schools and agencies across the country. I was participating in a Masterclass with the Presencing Institute at MIT at the time<sup>5</sup> and Theory U and other participative methodologies that enable participatory leadership are key informing frameworks for the program. The use of 'animation' rather than 'facilitation' is an intentional one since the task is not one of driving change but rather of animating the system to enable transformation to occur in local contexts. The idea of hosting and stewarding space, with participants as teachers, is a central guiding principle of the program. It also brings Catholic Social Teaching to life in the context of the call to transformative action contained in *Laudato Si'* (Papal encyclical 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.presencing.com/>

## **Facilitating transformational change: paying attention to the relational dimension**

While the early focus of the work of Earthcare was on the issue of climate change, the Director recognized the need for a more holistic approach that brought together the social and human sciences with the natural sciences, supported by ecotheology. She also recognized the need for a strong social process to enable such an integrated approach. A strong 'environmental' focus brought with it a more technical orientation around energy and resource use, sustainable buildings and sustainability more generally. However, if these weren't situated within a broader transformational framework, this focus alone did not open up the transformational path that ecological conversion was calling for.

Understanding the 'system' that we were seeking to influence and take on a journey was no small task. This meant that relationships had to be built on multiple levels. The Director developed connections with directors of other Catholic agencies (including social services and health) and paid attention to how to take the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on the journey. School systems were relatively easy, as smaller bounded systems with clear governance and organisational structures, a core focus, *etc.* These were therefore our first practice field. Finding appropriate entry points was key, since we wanted to avoid the perception that this was a matter for the person responsible for buildings and grounds and the 'environmental' champion on the staff, since we were wanting to model an alternative path from inception. In those schools where the school principal was involved from inception and we had opportunity to form a reference group comprising staff and students to take the lead. This group then helped design a whole school workshop to initiate the transformational journey, which included all dimensions of school life, including community relationships, whole organisation planning, the religious dimension, learning processes, cultivating grounds and ethical resource use.<sup>6</sup> This process of structuring for emergence and for full engagement with the school community gave us a good sense of what was required to engage across 'the system'.

Having prototyped an approach in schools, my task as Social Process Advisor was to design a program for those in leadership positions in schools and agencies that would enable them to lead this journey of transformational change in their own contexts. The guiding principles of participation, transformative pedagogy (including pedagogy of place), systems thinking, and personal and organisational learning provide anchor points for this program. The intention is to provide an experience of the transformational journey that people are to lead in their own contexts, and the program concludes with each participant presenting the design and first steps for their context. The key movements of transformational leadership are captured in Figure 1.

The task of hosting and stewarding is one that requires safeguarding against the abuse of power. This is particularly relevant in the movement to crystallize vision and intention, where the temptation to revert to traditional ways of being and

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://catholicearthcare.org.au/> for all the resources related to ASSISI

doing is very powerful. The three voices listed on the left of Figure 1 (the voice of judgement (VOJ), which prevents the open mind, the voice of cynicism (VOC), which prevents the open heart and the voice of fear (VOF), which prevents the open will) need to be acknowledged as people transform relationships and seek new forms of social organisation. The ongoing attentiveness to power ensures that new paths are revealed and generated collectively. This is what makes collective engagement worthwhile. The source of the 'solution' could be old knowledge or a hybrid; what is key is that the new path is emergent and is collectively generated. Creativity or generativity can only happen with the appropriate social relations in place.

We had a clear reminder of how power can be exercised in a recent Animator program. Two of the 25 participants had national profiles and were leading advocates in the national Catholic climate change movement. We had used a scenario thinking process to explore alternative futures and what bringing these to fruition might require. As participants were tentatively exploring what all of this meant in their own contexts as they worked to effect change within their own sphere of influence, one of the advocates made public statements about the significance of her and her colleague's work on the national stage. This immediately silenced those working in school contexts and diminished their contribution. This provided opportunity for a profound conversation about the ways in which power can be exercised in groups and reflections about 'pulling rank' and how this interrupts the generation of new meaning and emergence.<sup>7</sup>

The will to power and the will to love are always present and exist in dynamic relationship as we seek to create new forms of social organisation (Kahane 2010).<sup>8</sup> If we understand 'organisation' as already concretely embodied in people's relationships with one another (Strathern 1995), then building an awareness of how to shape these relationships is a central part of leading transformational change. This work is less about propositional knowledge and more about the cultivation of character and disposition that allows for ongoing revelation and discernment, what Watkins (2014) refers to as 'dispositional knowledge'. She talks about a spiritual attentiveness; attentiveness to the promptings of the Spirit and about theology as discernment of the work of the Spirit.

Taking the transformational rather than the transactional path also brings with it unintended consequences, since one is working with emergent processes and outcomes, rather than driving for particular outcomes, which can be 'managed'. One of these is interrupting existing power relations and vested interests and the resistance this provokes. The agency has been integrated into the work of one of the bigger Catholic agencies, with a much stronger environmental focus, with a curtailment of the transformational agenda. This does not reduce the impact of

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<sup>7</sup> See the work of Deep Democracy <http://deep-democracy.net/www16.cpt3.host-h.net/view-page.php?page=About%20Lewis%20Deep%20Democracy>

<sup>8</sup> See Adam Kahane (2010) for an elaboration on the work of Paul Tillich and Martin Luther King: "Power without love is reckless and abusive [...] love without power is sentimental and *anemic*" (xxxix-xxx).

the transformational work that the agency has initiated, since in transformational change one is always working nested systems. The learning communities which were created and connected continue on the transformational path. What it does alert us to is that there is always a necessary tension between agency and structure as we seek to find meaningful ways of organizing ourselves in response to changing circumstances. Understanding the broader context at the same time as exploring one's own parameters of influence is essential to understanding the relationship between structure and agency as one seeks to influence the direction of change. The reality of competing (and potentially conflicting) rationalities means that we engage in a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation of meaning; this transformation is ongoing (there is no finally "transformed" state). This does not mean that we settle on nothing, but rather that our knowledge is provisional (and needs to be) if we are to accommodate competing rationalities in a way that does not privilege one over another (Flyvbjerg 1998, 2000).

### **3.6 Learning by Doing**

In 1996, I was co-leading curriculum transformation in the Faculty of Architecture and Allied Disciplines with the Dean of the Faculty (who was also Head of Architecture). One of the other heads of department, Rob Taylor, was also deeply interested in the work of Peter Senge and his associates at MIT. During the three years of educational development in the faculty (and while I was completing a Masters in Education which documented the process of curriculum transformation - Seneque 1995, 1996), Rob and I were exploring what would be involved in creating an educational program based on a systemic philosophy, critical systems thinking, and organisational learning principles and practices. The Vice-Chancellor, Brenda Gourley, was supportive of the faculty-based work, and I had worked with her on the institution-wide work of building a learning organisation. At the same time as Rob and I were doing this exploratory work, Brenda was approached by the Kellogg Foundation with an invitation to establish a Leadership Centre for southern Africa. They had been attracted by (amongst other things) the university's attempts at building a learning organisation and how this and insights from systems thinking and complexity thinking had informed the university's strategic intent.

The two agendas aligned very well and during 1997, while still in the faculty, Rob and I conceived of the first Masters program which would be offered by the Centre. The organising principle of the curriculum was not leadership, but rather an introduction to ways of intervening in complex problems in order to improve the situation for all involved and provide the basis for ethical, sustainable development in Africa. It was our belief that the capacity to lead was learned through such immersion. This would provide opportunity for theorising leadership in an African context and build the capability for systemic leadership through addressing the complex problems facing the continent. At the same time, we worked on the funding and governance structures to support the establishment of the Centre. The creative work of building an educational program and inviting academics from across the two university campuses (Durban and

Pietermaritzburg) to teach on the program was a much easier task than building governance structures across faculty boundaries. The opportunities for transformational work was clear through the educational programs, and I had also hoped that the establishment of the Centre might provide transformational opportunity within the university, and had embarked on a number of scenario conversations with senior academics to elicit scenarios for the Centre and how it could transform the institution. The intention of these conversations was also to build relationships across the institution and invite teaching and research contributions to the Centre.

I've documented the struggle involved in establishing a cross-disciplinary Centre in the context of faculty-based decision-making structures and the disciplines (Seneque & Bond 2010). Attempts at establishing a cross-faculty 'advisory group' proved difficult and the Centre was obliged to find a faculty home and was incorporated into the Faculty of Business and Management. Its potential to transform inwards into the university was only partially realized. Its potential for broader transformation through partnering with civil society and other organisations to address complex social problems has also been compromised through the location in what is now called the Graduate School of Business, Management and Leadership. While the original intention was to create an alternative to the traditional MBA programs and to build organisational capability, shifts in the HE education agenda in South Africa (as is the case elsewhere) have closed down the space for this kind of innovative program. This obviously speaks to the issue of sustaining transformational change initiatives.

### **Facilitating transformational change: paying attention to the relational dimension**

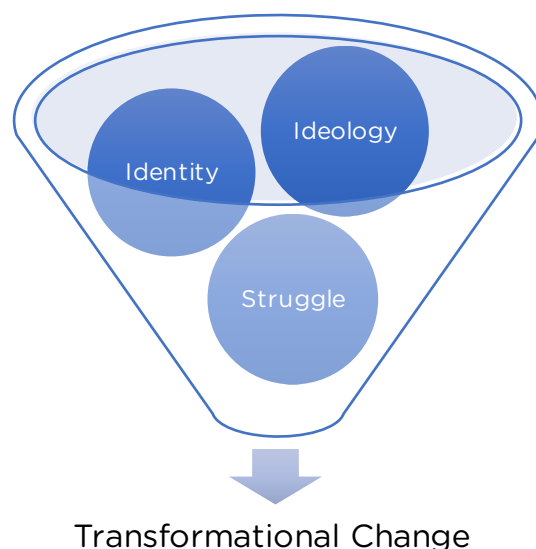
The deep attention to process and to relationships in the belief that quality outcomes will emerge is central to transformational work. This requires experimentation in real contexts in order to create the conditions for personal learning, collective learning, and learning about the 'system' through attempting to influence the nature and direction of change. It was our belief that 'leading to learn and learning to lead' were mutually informing processes. Learning by doing enables an integration of head, heart, and hands through putting them in dynamic relationship.

My faculty-based work of creating communities of learning and co-inquiry around transforming the curriculum provided a practice field, where strong relationships were built with heads of department with aligned interests. The fact that this work was nested in the university's strategic intent to become a learning organisation gave legitimacy and substance to the agenda. The prototype that we worked on together was a Masters in Organisational Systems, which challenged the conventional MBA programs, with their implicit managerialist assumptions. This experimentation meant that we were in a strong position to set up a Leadership Centre, with this as the flagship program. Our intention was to model an integrated teaching, research, and service program, and we invited staff from across disciplines and across the university to teach on the first program. My role

was to lead a collaborative curriculum development process to ensure that all staff understood the underpinning systems philosophy and informing pedagogy, as they developed the modules for which they were responsible. Similarly, we were committed to enabling students to lead transformational change in their own contexts.

The program consisted of 3-day residential modules, which were experiential and exposed students to different frameworks and methodologies for working with complex problems, such as transformative scenario planning, critical systems thinking, dialogue and generative conversation etc. Participants then went back into their different organisational and country contexts to use their work as learning laboratory. Their role was to document what they had learned about concepts and frameworks, about themselves and about their contexts through trying to create the context for systemic change. My role was to enable the cross learning across organisational and country contexts during the residential modules and to support the learning communities that students formed to support one another between modules.

The work of inner and outer transformation was supported by systemic action research frameworks (Flood 1997, 1999; Marshall *et al.* 2011) and other tools for learning and critical reflection. In a relational ontology and epistemology, the work of transforming the 'system' is also the work of transforming the 'self' and bringing forth a new identity. The dimensions of this new 'identity' include a new perspective (the 'what' dimension) in the way I see, engage and make meaning in the world; a new stance (the 'who' dimension): who I am within the system; a new vantage point (the 'where' dimension): how I see myself in relationship with the world. There were systems of peer coaching and mentoring as part of the work of building learning communities. Staff also supported this transformational work.



*Figure 4: Leading Transformational Change: three lenses of analysis*

The model that emerged out of the task of institutional engagement around the establishment and governance of the Leadership Centre is captured in Figure 4 (Seneque & Bond 2010). The three lenses of analysis reveal the challenge of leading transformational change processes in institutional contexts, where there are always competing rationalities and interests.

### **3.7 Sustaining: structural change and building personal and organisational capability for transformative action**

Sustaining transformational initiatives requires innovation in governance and decision-making. Change laboratories or social/innovation labs have been a vehicle for this kind of innovation and local experimentation. A lab that I am currently co-facilitating is the Wellbeing Economies in Africa lab. The initiative seeks to challenge the dominant economic paradigm and create an alternative through local experimentation and innovation. It involves 27 people from 8 countries across the African continent in an attempt to stimulate collective change for a wellbeing-centred development model in Africa. The Lab has been designed as a form of deep dialogue capable of triggering personal transformation, which can become a powerful driver of change through the connection with collective leadership and strategic action. These three levels – personal, collective and strategic – are essential to developing transformative actions that are sustainable over time and achieve significant outreach and impact. Too often good ideas are not implemented, because people struggle to organise effectively or fail to alter the structural constraints hindering social change.<sup>9</sup>

The lab has been a year-long process, with Theory U as one of the informing frameworks. It is intended to give life to the WE-Africa Network.<sup>10</sup> The lab itself is a prototype, which is enabling the hosting team to test a number of assumptions as we seek to create an alternative development discourse and practices across the continent. We are now in the prototyping phase in preparation for a final two days of lab meeting in South Africa in November. One of the prototypes that has emerged from the lab has been the exploration of wellbeing- based rather than needs-based approaches to community development. These prototypes are giving life to alternative economic discourse and practices at the local level. This will be followed by a 5-day Wellbeing Economies Festival to engage the broader scientific community and other communities to create a platform for ongoing collaboration, not only across the continent, but globally. It remains to be seen to what extent this lab can provide a platform for ongoing collaboration and innovation across the continent and an example for the rest of the world.

#### **Questions for sustaining that emerge from the lab experience**

- How do we create the conditions for both personal transformation and collective action?

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.we-do-change.org/fileadmin/downloads/GLAC\\_TN-Booklet\\_WE-Africa\\_Lab.pdf?\\_1491305842](https://www.we-do-change.org/fileadmin/downloads/GLAC_TN-Booklet_WE-Africa_Lab.pdf?_1491305842)

<sup>10</sup> <http://we-africa.org/about-we-africa/>



- How do we enable that action to be transformative – that is, drawing into the conversation a much broader stakeholder group/community groups who are not part of this gathering?
- How do we support individuals on this path of transformation when they themselves are going back into institutional arrangements which don't necessarily support this kind of work?
- As we embark on the work of prototyping, how do we nudge people towards genuine collaboration and innovation – not more of the same under a new guise?
- How do we bring the discourse and practices associated with wellbeing economies into generative conversation with the organisational imperatives faced by lab participants (for example, those working on implementing Green Economy strategies, whether working with NGOs or government)?
- How do we link human development and wellbeing economies?
- How do we support individuals and groups as they embark on this journey: how do we provide coaching and mentoring that at the same time enables self-organisation, without which the lab will not be sustained beyond the year-long journey?
- How do we structure in such a way that the process enables this emergence of connectivity across the continent?

In 2014, The Susanna Wesley Foundation (SWF) at the University of Roehampton initiated a project to explore transformational change in the Discipleship and Ministry Learning Network (DMLN) of the Methodist Church. Supporting a conversation-based approach to co-initiating something that would be of value for the Network, Sue Miller (Deputy Director of SWF) and I started conversations with a number of people in leadership positions in the Network. During the course of this exploratory work, a number of people expressed an interest in working with communities of practice as a vehicle for promoting and sustaining transformational change - both within specialisms and across the network. My experience of working at building communities of co-inquiry and learning in HE, communities of practice in a corporate setting and communities of transformation in a parish setting suggested that this approach to creating a context for collective meaning making would be an effective way of aligning individuals and groups with the core values and beliefs underpinning the Network. We agreed to initiate a prototype within one of the specialisms and invited interested regional groupings to participate in the project. The process Sue and I embarked on was one of travelling to the regional groupings who had expressed an interest in participating in the action learning project. We typically spent a half to a whole day in conversation with the regional co-ordinator and team, bringing different frameworks for thinking together as they explored some of the following as guiding questions:

- What is your 'practice' in the broad sense?

- What is the 'practice field' for this context?
- What theological understandings underpin your practice?
- What does that mean for building an intentional community of practice that continues to learn together in an intentional way?
- What does this mean for the learning communities that you're leading and growing at different 'levels'?
- How do you embody these practices and ways of being in your own community such that you can enable their development in those communities you serve?

The experience of using communities of practice as vehicle for transformation within the DMLN has been documented (Bond, Miller & Seneque 2016). A number of other participatory methodologies were also used to support the work of the project, including Theory U: the Art of Participatory Leadership.<sup>11</sup> The intention was to build the capability of officers (and, through them, their stakeholders) by modeling and giving an experience of approaches to transformative, social learning in order to sustain the initiative. The three authors also hosted a workshop with a number of those who had participated in the action learning project with Sue and myself - and others from the DMLN - in order to design together an experience the group was going to lead at the next DMLN gathering. Clare Watkins introduced the group to Theological Action Research (Cameron *et al.* 2014), which also allows a formative transformation of practice and where theology is disclosed through conversation.

The intention with the communities of practice project was to help surface understandings of core purpose and what constituted the 'practice' of the Network, and to introduce processes that would allow for an integration of core values (and implicit theological understandings) with the practice of the Network. Where the regional coordinator was committed to the project and enabled the team to fully engage with emergent rather than pre-ordained outcomes there was impact for individuals and for the team. The report documents the challenges of introducing alternative ways of organising and of being which are not necessarily supported by the broader reward and recognition systems (and governance systems) in place in the Network and in the Methodist Church more broadly. It also raises the role of theological 'thought leadership' and how this gets infused through all deliberations of (and in) the Network.

### **Questions for sustaining that emerge from the Communities of Practice initiative**

The questions posed seek to respond to key themes that emerged through the research and action learning initiative. They aim to stimulate further debate among the DMLN Leadership team and offer a focus that helps to inform the on-going discussions in the Network about working with the concept of communities of practice as a vehicle for supporting transformational change within the wider Church.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.artofhosting.org/>

- Where is strategic leadership enacted within the DMLN?
- What is the role, function and interface between regional activity and specialist pathway work and how are these best supported and delivered within the Network and Church?
- What specific support might regional and specialist teams need in order to embrace and use communities of practice as an approach and way of working with their key client/stakeholder groups?
- How can the Network manage and work with expectations and perceptions of the DMLN from key stakeholders?
- In order to use communities of practice for promoting and supporting change what would facilitate such an approach and what might inhibit the flourishing of communities of practice?
- How can the DMLN build a desire and capacity within the wider Church to embed the principles underpinning communities of practice as a means of working on the challenges it faces?

### **Facilitating transformational change: paying attention to the relational dimension**

The focus on communities of practice as a vehicle of transformational change is nested in the following view of learning, and the relationship between structure and agency.

Learning is an interplay between social competence and personal experience. It is a dynamic two-way relationship between people and the social learning systems in which they participate. It combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures (Wenger 2000: 227).

It is the practice dimension that is key to transforming relationships and to shaping community, not a focus on community as 'product'. In the language of theological action research, practices are embodied theology, and communities of practice can be the forum or context for exploring these practices.

The relevance and value of adopting a conversation-based approach is precisely that the practice of conversation requires us to be attentive to encounter with the other and to difference. The conversations that Sue and I conducted with regional teams, while not based in a theological action research frame, served to surface operant and espoused theologies as constituted in the practice of the various specialisms that form these teams. Shared commitment and communion provided the context for mutual learning. The transformation in relationship which becomes possible through mutual challenge and sharing of reflections on practice, requires a discipline of careful listening.

This relational engagement allows for an exploration about what is possible in the complex contexts in which we find ourselves. In this view, dialogue and generative conversation are the crucible for transforming relationship. Falzon (1998: 94) captures the requirements of social dialogue:

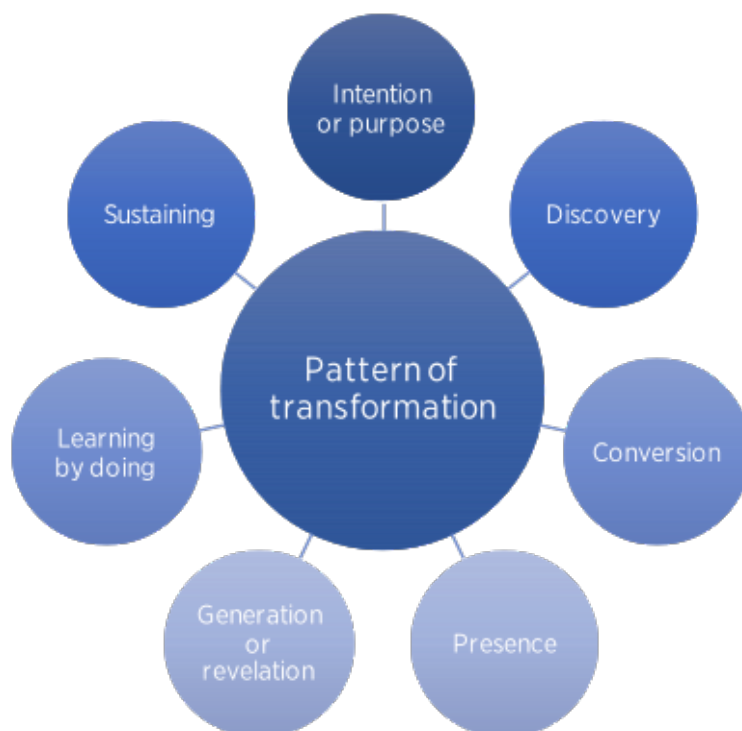
To suppose that all we need to do is to tolerate the other, to leave the other alone in its splendid isolation, ignores and indeed helps conceal the

real social relations in which we all exist, in which we are continually and unavoidably affecting the other, as well as being affected in turn by the other. It is to forget that in a certain sense, we all have blood on our hands, that we all remain implicated in the practices of the present.

Supporting locally-led communities of practice, co-inquiry, learning, and the ongoing attentiveness that this requires is part of the work of sustaining transformational change. The intentional connection to (shared) practice and building 'dispositional knowing' and capability is part of the ongoing work of such communities and those who support them. Keeping such communities connected in ongoing transformational relationship in order to 'scale across' and build systems of influence is also part of the work of sustaining. Enabling what emerges from these communities to stay connected to the larger system and to allow for innovation in governance and decision-making systems is part of the work of those in leadership roles. Without this ongoing learning relationship, new contexts for organising and transformative action can be constrained. The work of transformational change is neither top-down nor bottom-up; it is rather enabling new relational contexts for creative responses to the challenges that we face.

### 3.8 The pattern of transformational change

Figure 6 below reveals the pattern of transformation. This is not a normative framework and it is not offered as a new methodology, but has emerged from reflection (with others) on my lived experience so that others working at catalysing transformational change and building different forms of social organisation may look more closely at the movement of transformation, what it might involve for them and in their context, and how it could be supported.



*Figure 5: Pattern of transformation*

The role of facilitation is to enable the pattern of transformation and to make the process visible. If change is a constant, then it is the capacity to influence the nature and direction of change, in relationship with others, that gives it the potential to move in a transformational rather than a transactional direction. And cultivating the conditions for appropriate social relations is a critical condition for this generative or creative response to change.

## Conclusion

The work of releasing transformational change requires us to pay attention to how community and structure come together to allow for emergent understandings about how to organize ourselves. For those catalyzing transformational change processes, what is required is a formative process in relational pedagogy that allows for emergence, rather than control: this includes being able to live with uncertainty and unresolved tensions; the ability to suspend judgement and a desire to jump to quick solutions; the capacity to release a desire for control; and for certainty and the associated desire to 'fix' things. What is also required is that we hold this stance and this dispositional knowing in the context of acting together in the world. Richard Rohr's Centre for Action **and** Contemplation<sup>12</sup> holds these in necessary tension.

It has been my intention in this paper to reveal the process of navigating and sense-making that is central to transformational change processes. The mastery of a facilitator – the person who is navigating and nudging change processes – looks effortless. I believe from my experience that it's important to make explicit the qualities and dispositions that are part of that mastery and how these are cultivated through practice. This transparency is critical as one helps people (personally and collectively) navigate transition and uncertainty and cross gaps they could not have imagined crossing as they create new forms of social organisation. It is a process of helping people name, reconcile and make sense of the movement of transformation, which allows meaning to unfold. I know from my experience that mastery does not come from slavishly following a particular methodology and is not about technique. It comes rather from being able to read contexts well and to create contexts which enable personal and collective sense-making as people move through transition. The critical role for facilitation is in creating new relational contexts for doing things in the world. This relational awareness is particularly important at points of transition where there are high levels of uncertainty and people need to be 'contained' as they navigate their next steps together. These are all points of potential integration and emergence of personal and collective knowing, insight, and wisdom.

The deep commitment to social process as the vehicle for building community is held by hope. To paraphrase Vaclav Havel, hope is not the thought that something will go well, but the conviction that something is worth doing, no matter how it turns out. The challenge of integration (of head, heart, and hands) and the evolution of consciousness that becomes possible through participating in human community and of practising what one preaches in every moment in relationship

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<sup>12</sup> <https://cac.org/>

with others, is a lifelong journey of human becoming. And testing “whether community is possible” (Veling 1997) every day in the context of the human family (both immediate and more distant) is possibly the best test.

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