

August 7, 2020

## Presencing in International Development Cooperation

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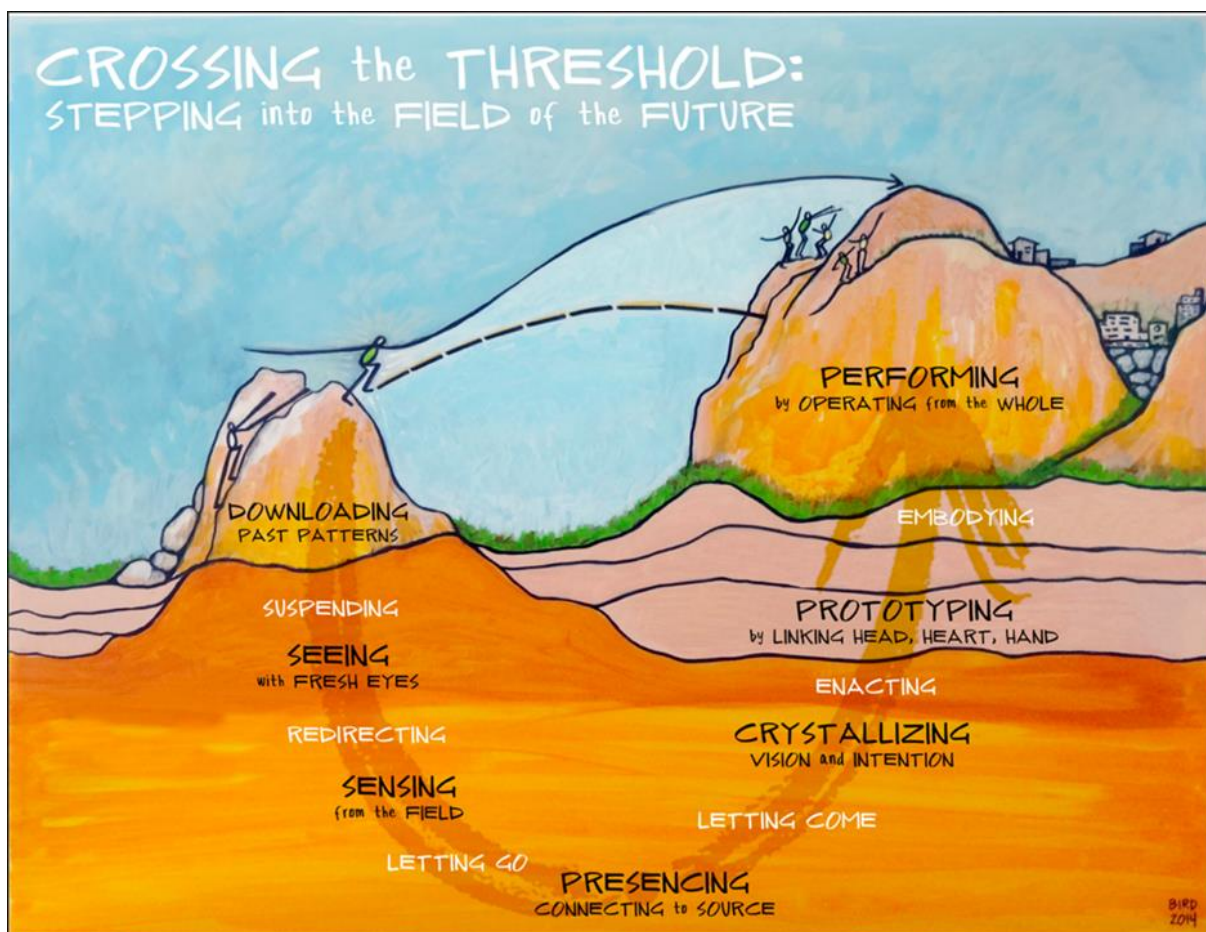
*“We live in a time of disruptive change. How to activate our capacity to lean into the emerging future may well be the most crucial leadership challenge of our time. How do you cultivate curiosity, compassion and courage in the face of prejudice, anger and fear?”*

Wording of the announcement of the u.lab course entitled Leading from the Emerging Future.

Wording of the announcement of the u.lab course entitled Leading from the Emerging Future. We wrote this article from our home offices due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which made the invitation from the u.lab course seem all the more relevant. How can humanity find a way to a future that cares for everyone on the planet and the planet itself? How can development cooperation sense relevant opportunities for all?

In September 2018, a group of development consultants from various parts of the world and different development boutique consultancies came together to participate in the u.lab Online course. The course is an introduction to a method called Theory U, developed at MIT’s Centre for Organizational Learning. Theory U is a change management method and the title of a book by Otto Scharmer. The name originates from the graphical representation of a **social transformation process** in the form of the letter U (see figure). Otto Scharmer calls this process *presencing*, a word that has been created to express the combination of “presence” and “sensing”. It is vital for this process that leaders change themselves in the process.

**Our group has learnt to appreciate this being present - with hearts, hands and minds - to understand more about current situations and what the future might hold.** And we think that this listening in different ways to other sources of wisdom is very helpful for meaningful and more participatory development cooperation.



Source: <https://www.ottoscharmer.com/theoryu>, Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0

In presencing, the participants do not deconstruct reality analytically and then try to conceive a solution directly from their understanding of the problem. **They adopt an attitude that activates their intuition and feelings, and goes beyond analytical thinking.**

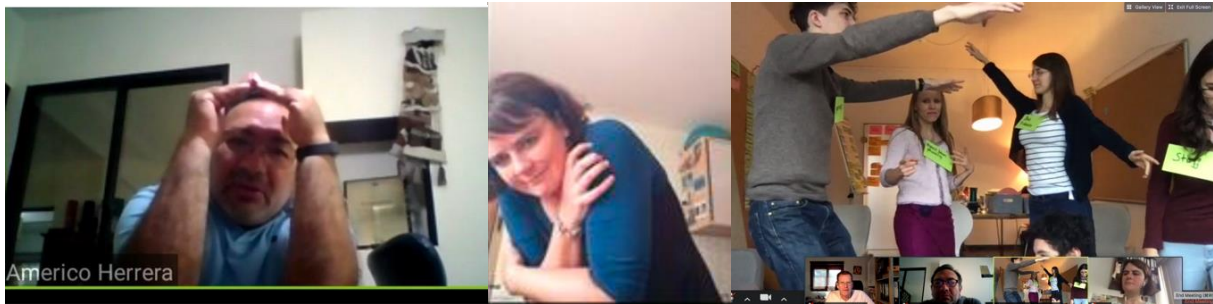
**All our sessions begin with a moment of silence.** A conscious start makes a big difference to the working atmosphere of the group. Feeling the positive effect of such a start, we have started to use this quiet entry during our consultancy work and during workshops. And we tried out new forms of mindfulness, like one-breath meditation or walking meditation, which are more accessible to everyone.

In Theory U, we consciously embark on a journey instead of engaging in an efficient analytical process - starting our tour at the upper left side of the U. It is a matter of letting go of our explanations and value judgments and paying close attention and listening. By letting go of everything we think we know, we create space for something new "going down" the U. At the bottom of the U there is the moment of presencing and opening up. This is the moment when the practitioner gets the first glimpse of a new, shapeable future. In the ascending part of the U, the vision of the future crystallises. This is followed by an iterative process of prototyping and concretising the change.

**But how you can let go of your judgements and be open to new ideas to come, without analytically deducing them?** Theory U provides very concrete and hands-on tools. They consist of practices that

open up our conscience with non-verbal communication, often supported by mutual silence. Concrete methods are using bodily expressions to communicate or sculpting models of reality.

One of the **non-verbal techniques** the group has often used to explore a “stuck” situation in personal and organisational life is Social Presencing Theatre (SPT)<sup>1</sup>. In SPT, **we use gestures and the position of our body to communicate**. These body-based practices increase our sensitivity to current experiences - they draw attention to changes in social or contextual areas and gift us with a unconditioned openness to sense opportunities in the future. For instance, when counselling each other in our hub sessions, we shared our personal “stuck” situation through a gesture, representing our feelings of being stuck with our bodies. This new type of communication surprised and helped us to overcome conventional thought patterns.



*Connected by video, the practitioners only made the gestures in front of the camera, or sometimes invited other colleagues to semi-presential meetings.*

New ideas also came from **3D sculpting exercises using stones, sticks and Playmobil** to represent our complex working realities. Suddenly the participants saw new connections between the actors or thought about influences from the past. They could then rearrange the actors in ways that opened up opportunities for the future.



*When we do the 3D sculpting, one of us moves the figures for the rest of the group and shows the arrangement for our joint analysis from all directions through the camera.*

These exercises and methods had another surprising effect. Even if we were communicating only via video conferencing, **our hub sessions have brought us very close as persons**. As we opened up and talked and shared from our hearts in our group, we connected as humans, even though most of us had never physically met before. The experience made us believe that we can still cooperate much more,

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<sup>1</sup> Social Presencing Theater (SPT) is an emerging art form that explores the creative potential of U-Theory and Presencing. The word theatre here means "place of performance of significant events or actions". Developed under the direction of dancer and choreographer Arawana Hayashi, the method helps people to understand present reality and to explore emerging future possibilities. Through this exercise, the participants learn to take care of their bodies and to improve their awareness of the "social body".



more in-depth, even without travelling. And we are grateful for this remote opportunity - even before COVID-19.

In joint practice, the participants were able to experience how Theory U can help to overcome societal or cultural frontiers which exist in development cooperation. In the *joyn-coop* office in Munich, we invited our intern and now local consultant, Saka Mora, from rural Benin to the exercises. With impressive ease, he engaged in the bodywork of Social Presencing Theatre and said that the methods were just beautiful. The group reflected together how they could build bridges to the knowledge and wisdom of people from oral cultures - in the past, the group members had only used analytical methods and visualisations based on writing. The participants started to question the approaches they used in the past.



*In this workshop with our trainer Kate Johnson from the Presencing Institute, we discovered new dimensions of SPT with our then intern Saka Mora.*

Mesopartner used the instrument “Village” in a project planning mission. They invited the stakeholders to move in a space with a limited selection of movements. The exercise in the Village answers the questions: **how do you feel and act in social systems?** While participating in the Village itself, how and where are attention and action needed to bring out the potential of the group? The exercise provided us with insights into the dynamics of the cooperation system. Without specific objectives, some participants lack orientation; other participants appreciate the intellectual freedom of non-verbal communication. Such insights can be used very well for project management.



*The Village works in large spaces and unusual places, such as a roof terrace on the thirtieth floor.*

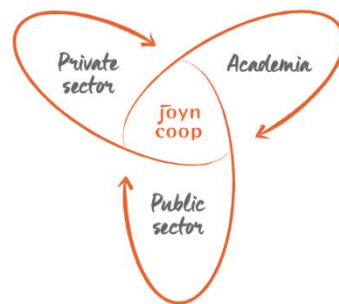
After the end of the u.lab online course, our group continued working. We value the virtual meetings as an opportunity to experiment with new methods, collegial advice and deep sharing among people they trust. **Step by step, we are integrating the philosophy and instruments of Theory U and Social Presencing into our consulting work.** The mostly positive reaction of our customers and participants has motivated us to continue.

The experience of letting go of cherished beliefs frees us and enables us to embrace new situations openly. **We are convinced that in a time of increasing uncertainties, this way of approaching complex social systems is contemporary and particularly suitable for accompanying development processes positively.** Being silent for a moment and listening to our bodies brings different

intelligence. It is also enriching to see ourselves as consultants as part of a larger social body. Change is therefore not the task of a leader or consultant, but a collective response of a social system.



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We combine expertise in development cooperation with the methods and quality standards of management consulting and take latest research in academia into consideration.