Back to The Circle: Facilitating Regenerative Change through Dialogue

Practical Handbook for Civic Educators, Activists and Changemakers

Contents

*We invite you to dive into this publication in a way that feels right for you! You can either explore each piece one by one, taking in the reflections and insights at your own pace, or make it playful — grab a digital or physical dice, roll it, and let chance guide you to a random section. The aliveness of this collection is that there's no set order — every piece is part of a larger whole, offering new perspectives, yet each tells its own story and can be explored independently. Feel free to dive in and explore in whatever way resonates with you!

This Handbook was published as part of the project "The Dilemma About Sustainable Choices," co-created by Villa Fohrde, the Galician Foundation of Development and Education, and Tipu Nature School. The project was funded by Erasmus+.

VILLA FOHRDE

Villa Fohrde (Germany) is a sustainable and open-minded educational house in the Federal state of Brandenburg. Every year around 1,700 people take part in our seminars on sustainable development, democracy, culture and health. With different educational formats, national and international projects and activities like an annual cultural festival we contribute to a sustainable, democratic and tolerant society.
Founded in 1991, Villa Fohrde is certified as an educational house by the Federal state of Brandenburg, the Federal Agency for Civic Education, and as a qualified provider for Education for Sustainable Development.

Galician Foundation of Development and Education (Poland)
We share a vision of a world where everyone's needs are recognized and valued, where diverse perspectives are embraced, and where individuals can actively contribute to their own well-being and that of their communities. To support this, we enable individuals to navigate complex realities, value dialogue and diversity. We enjoy creating spaces for exchange and bringing people together. Since 2017, we have been actively implementing local initiatives and international projects focused on civic education, youth participation, development of key competencies and dialogue. We co-created two long-term educational programs: AktywniejWsi in the Beskid Niski region of Poland and BeINvolved in Georgia, both aimed at empowering youth and strengthening the capacities of young people and educators.

Tipu Nature School (MTÜ Tipu Looduskool) (Estonia) is a non-profit organization active in the field of environmental and nature education situated in Soomaa National Park in Southwest-Estonia, We offer educational programs to schools and kindergartens, children and youth camps during school vacations, hobby classes on natural sciences in different schools in the area, training and workshops. We have created a place for exchange, for people to come together and take part in our adventures, raising awareness for the beauty of nature surrounding us. The organization was awarded the EUROPARC certificate as a sustainable tourism provider in the region.

Behind The Narrative

Bĕtka Wójcik, Corinna Thiel, Dagmar Hoder

A circle encourages us to slow down and truly hear ourselves. In group settings, we often rehearse our thoughts, but in a circle, we focus on listening and responding authentically. I learn to trust that the right words will come when it's my turn to speak, fostering honesty from the heart that extends to all areas of our lives. This process invites vulnerability, allowing us to recognize our feelings — whether hurt, anxiety, or concern for world events. As we share what matters to us, we grow closer and collaborate more effectively.

The story of this publication began a few years ago in the peaceful mountains of Beskid Niski in Poland, where we gathered for a seminar on sustainability with leaders and educators from Germany, Moldova, and Poland. One August night, under a sky full of stars — a scene still common in that part of the world — we found ourselves questioning why so many efforts in Education for Sustainable Development seem to lack lasting impact. Our discussions revealed a tendency to frame sustainability in a black-and-white narrative, hindering long-term progress. It became clear that the changes we yearn for are often pursued with the same tools and mindset that created the challenges we face.

After that long night of reflection, we began to dream. This is how our projects typically take shape — through dialogue, mutual understanding, and a shared vision for meaningful change. Thus, the project "The dilemma about sustainable choices" was born. It was truly a journey! We invited others to join us, creating a space for collective reflection, mapping out our ideas, uncertainties, and questions.

We engaged deeply in discussions about dilemmas, choices, responsibility, and freedom. These topics are central to the fields of Education for Sustainable Development and Civic Education, which we all work in. At one point, we debated whether air travel should be prohibited for project participants. Instead of imposing a rule, we chose to engage in conversation — seeking to understand the motivations, implications, and responsibilities associated with our choices. In the end, some participants flew, while others opted for bus travel across Europe. Through this dialogue, we all emerged more open and conscious, better understanding the privileges and complexities involved in our decisions. This process was far more enriching than a simple top-down directive, fostering a culture of awareness and personal responsibility.

From these reflectiovns, we realized that the training course we were planning as part of this project should focus on dialovgue. For change to be meaningful and lasting, sustainable choices must come from within, grounded in pvaersonal values and shaped through dialogue — not dictated by external pressures. Too often, sustainable choices arise from shame or guilt, only to recreate the very patterns we aim to change.

We view dialogue as the "step zero" — a crucial foundation for making responsible choices that are truly owned by those who make them. Navigating life today may not be easy, as we explore in this publication. Yet, this project has helped us uncover new sources of hope. We see that transformation is possible and can be achieved through methods that foster genuine change rather than simply replicating existing mindsets with new ideas.

In our pursuit of meaningful change, we love exploring different models and frameworks. This curiosity led us to adopt the regenerative theory framework to better understand how we can contribute to addressing complex challenges and ultimately thrive in a truly regenerative manner. By embracing this framework, we aim to deepen our understanding of the interconnectedness of our actions and the systems we inhabit.

As Marshall Rosenberg wisely stated, "We want to take action out of the desire to contribute to life rather than out of fear, guilt, shame, or obligation."

The crises we face — ongoing wars and conflicts, climate crises, social division, and personal alienation — are not isolated problems but symptoms of a deeper issue: disconnection. In this pivotal time, we must not only address the surface symptoms of these crises but also rethink how we perceive ourselves and our place in the world. By embracing an identity rooted in relationality and fostering regenerative conversations, we can begin to heal these fractures. This publication invites us to step into a new way of being, where sustainability vis not merely about conserving resources, but about nurturing the relationships that sustain us all.

An Invitation to Explore: Regenerative Practices as a Mindset for Sustainable Education

Maxim Smekhov

Just as ecosystems co-evolve, human communities thrive when they evolve together, learning and adapting through mutual support and understanding. Dialogue enables this co-evolution by allowing us to exchange knowledge and experiences. Sustainable development and regeneration are not limited to the physical or ecological but also include cultural and social renewal. By valuing diverse voices and stories, we regenerate cultural narratives that support inclusivity and shared purpose. We need to let go of rigid definitions and start seeing ourselves as part of a dynamic, evolving system. This mindset shift invites us to approach both ourselves and the world with more openness, curiosity, and empathy.

In this publication, we explore the practical work of individuals and organizations from the project "The dilemma of sustainable choices." Each member brings diverse experiences as we apply the regenerative framework to examine its potential, reflecting on our learning from the field and communities of practice in education, facilitation, environmental and civic initiatives.

First, it's important to highlight a key insight that emerged from our initial mapping of narratives and sensations: sustainability initiatives in education and the non-profit sector have not significantly advanced in reducing our negative impact on the environment and society. To effectively address global challenges, we need to shift our focus from merely sustaining our systems to actively regenerating them.

Current approaches often prioritize minimizing harm, but urgent crises like ongoing wars, climate crises, and social inequality demand deeper transformations. It's no longer enough to balance economic, social, and environmental needs; we need solutions that heal and restore communities and ecosystems.

Sustainable development and Education for Sustainable Development are dynamic concepts, however, a static understanding of sustainability still remains as reflected by the well-known three pillars model of sustainability based on social, economic and environmental aspects. This understanding of sustainability is outdated and has been criticized recently.

As educators and facilitators we work with a dynamic understanding of sustainable development as promoted by the UN[1]. It strives for a world, where people, future generations and other beings have a good life — within the planetary boundaries. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers and qualifies learners to enable this societal transformation towards a sustainable world. It's not so much about reducing one's own ecological footprint, but about enlarging the handprint. This implies enabling learners to foster systemic changes in their environment: changing the food available at their school or influencing politics for sustainable laws. In order to do this, it follows a holistic approach and addresses the cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral levels of learning.

By using this outlook, ESD contributes to regenerative learning. The term "regeneration" will be used primarily in this handbook as we believe it is compatible with an up-to-date understanding of sustainable development, and can be fostered well through the ESD approach.
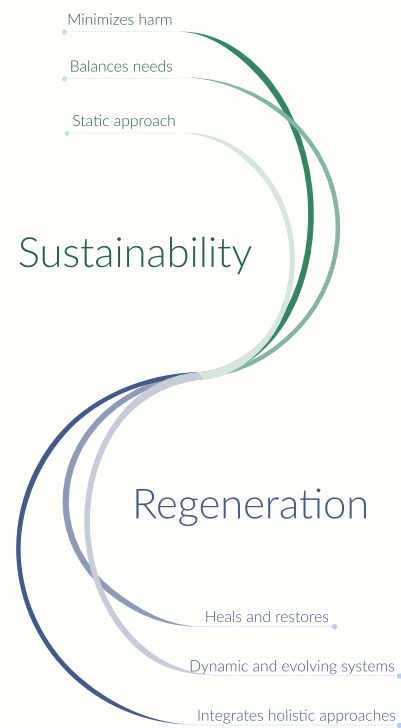
Relations between Sustainability and Regeneration

For those involved in education and social projects, adopting a regenerative model could be highly beneficial. Ideally, actions such as designing educational programs or organizing community events would contribute to regenerating the environments in which we operate.

We don't want to speculate with the term "regeneration" but rather seek to understand the practical role that facilitation, dialogue, and ecosystemic relational work can play in embracing regenerative thinking and action within the nonprofit sector, civil society, and educational settings. Regeneration is not just about environmental restoration — it's about nurturing healthy systems at every level, from individuals to communities, societies, and the planet. As emphasized in the UN's ESD for 2030 framework, Education for Sustainable Development requires a systemic and regenerative lens to empower learners to engage in the deep transformations necessary to create a thriving world within planetary boundaries, fostering a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

This transition challenges us to reshape our roles as facilitators, leaders and community organizers, fostering environments that not only sustain but regenerate. By prioritizing collaborative approaches and ecosystemic relational work, we can embed regenerative principles into our daily practices. This journey empowers us to engage deeply with our communities, ensuring our efforts promote social equity, environmental stewardship, and resilience, ultimately positioning us as catalysts for meaningful change so that both the planet and people can flourish.

---

[1] ESDfor2030: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802

Let's explore the key strategies which will allow regenerative practices
to become a part of civic education, civil society, and community work:

Facilitation & dialogue	We can create spaces for deep listening, meaningful conversation, and healing. Dialogue can become a tool to address the traumas, polarities, and challenges that hold us back, enabling transformation and progress toward both sustainability and regeneration. These conversations will allow us to reimagine our roles and actions in ways that sustain and heal our systems.
Holistic regeneration	Acts of regeneration and sustainability can work hand in hand to nurture healthy systems at all levels — individual, communal, societal, and planetary. This involves social, economic, and environmental healing, ensuring that all aspects of life are supported. A sustainable approach makes sure the systems we regenerate can thrive in the long-term, within planetary boundaries.
Collective wisdom & learning	By integrating both sustainable and regenerative thinking into learning processes, we foster mindsets that support collective wisdom. This helps us build resilient, connected communities capable of adapting and evolving, reimagining how we work and live together in ways that sustain and regenerate the world around us.
Collaborative action for the planet	Our work should invite individuals, organizations, and institutions to contribute to both sustainable and regenerative practices. By embedding these principles into our collective actions, we can create a more just, balanced, and thriving planet for all, ensuring that our efforts today sustain and restore the systems that future generations will depend on.

The table outlines an inspiring framework for integrating regenerative practices into education, civil society, and community work. It emphasizes the need for spaces of deep dialogue, addressing traumas, and fostering transformation, while nurturing social, economic, and ecological well-being across all levels.

Although this vision may sound idealistic, in this handbook, we aim to critically explore what these concepts truly mean in practice. Through reflection and experimentation, we invite you to explore how this shift can be carried out in tangible ways.

On-the-ground insight

A compelling example of regenerative thinking in practice is the "Human Library" project, which originated in Denmark and has since spread globally.

Context

Launched in 2000, the Living Library seeks to challenge stereotypes by allowing participants to "borrow" individuals with unique life experiences for meaningful conversations.

Implementation

- Event setup: These events are hosted in public spaces such as libraries and community centers, fostering an inviting atmosphere for dialogue.
- Diverse "Books": Volunteers from marginalized groups (e.g., refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals) share their personal stories.
- Deep listening: Participants engage in one-on-one conversations lasting 20-30 minutes, emphasizing deep listening and understanding.
- Facilitated reflection: Following the conversations, group discussions enable participants to reflect on their experiences.

Example

A Living Library event at the Oslo Public Library focused on "Understanding and Empathy" to address various social tensions, including:

- Immigration and refugee issues: Discussions on the challenges faced by refugees integrating into Norwegian society.
- LGBTQ+ rights: Conversations about acceptance, discrimination, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in both public and private spaces.
- Cultural identity: Participants explored the tensions surrounding cultural diversity and national identity, especially due to a rapidly changing demographic landscape.
- Mental health stigma: Dialogues included personal accounts of mental health challenges and the stigma often associated with them.

Outcomes

- Diverse participation: The event attracted a broad audience, encouraging interaction among various societal groups.
- Breaking down barriers: Participants reported increased empathy, with one individual noting a significant change in their perspective on refugees after a conversation.
- Building community: The event stimulated ongoing dialogues, leading to the establishment of follow-up discussion groups.

From the example above, we see that the Living Library serves as a powerful model for regenerative conflict resolution by fostering authentic connections and empathy among individuals. By allowing people to share their lived experiences in a safe space, it enables the creation of deeper understanding and emotional bonds. This communal narrative exchange not only highlights individual stories but also emphasizes the collective experiences that shape communities. The success of the Living Library underscores its potential to create more cohesive, resilient communities that are better equipped to navigate conflicts and differences.

Let's explore other important aspects of a regenerative approach in facilitation, education, and environmental initiatives.

Dialogue as a regenerative practice

Approaching dialogue as a transformative process marked by specific qualities, invites us to consider its potential as a regenerative practice. As practitioners, we sought to understand how dialogue — when fostering relationships, rebuilding trust, and strengthening communities — can profoundly support regeneration across social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. In capturing the unique qualities of dialogue, we highlight how it contributes meaningfully to practices aimed at renewal and resilience in diverse domains.

Creating spaces for connection

Dialogue fosters authentic communication and empathy, allowing individuals to share diverse perspectives. These conversations help to cultivate regenerative social spaces where both individuals and communities can grow and thrive together. By encouraging open, honest discussions, dialogue creates an environment where mutual understanding is prioritized over judgment, and where diverse identities can coexist and flourish.

Conscious and responsible choice

Honest and authentic dialogue creates space for more conscious and responsible decisions rooted in one's value system, empathy and awareness of interconnections. By listening to oneself and others, it fosters self-awareness and opens up opportunities to explore new perspectives — not through arguments, but through a connection on a universal level of needs, longings and values. This practice nurtures a culture of awareness and personal responsibility.

Healing and reconciliation

Much like regenerative practices that heal damaged ecosystems, dialogue has the potential to rehabilitate social and cultural wounds. By addressing conflicts, misunderstandings, and historical injustices, dialogue acts as a therapeutic tool that can restore trust and foster reconciliation among individuals and groups. This healing process is essential for building a foundation of mutual respect and understanding, which in turn allows communities to confront their challenges more effectively.

Building resilient communities

Engaging in meaningful dialogue encourages cooperation, trust, and collective problem-solving, which are essential elements for creating resilient communities capable of adapting to change. Through dialogue, individuals learn to collaborate and co-create solutions that reflect the needs and values of the community, promoting a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.

Identity as a network of relationships

In the context of working with people, shifting our mindset from "Who am I?" to "How am I connected?" transforms the way we view ourselves and our role within our communities and nature. This perspective invites us to see the world as a network of relationships, fostering deeper connections and empathy, which are vital for collective action.

Belonging and distributed identity

This way of understanding of identity through relating challenges the notion of the self as an isolated entity. It prompts individuals to ask questions like, "Who do I belong to?" and "How do my actions affect others?" In the context of sustainability, this mindset shift encourages individuals to move from "What can we do?" to "How can we sustain and regenerate together?" This collective approach not only enhances the sense of belonging but also promotes collaborative efforts toward sustainable practices.

Regenerating relationships with each other and the planet

Regenerative living begins with recognizing the interdependence of all life forms. By embracing a mindset rooted in care and connection, communities can become more resilient and sustainable. This interdependence requires individuals to cultivate relationships not only with one another but also with the environment, promoting a holistic understanding of sustainability that respects and nurtures all life.

Fluidity and multiplicity of identity

Identity is not a fixed state but rather a dynamic interplay of influences and experiences. This fluidity reflects the complex, ever-changing nature of the world around us, offering a more adaptable and responsive approach to sustainability. Recognizing the multiplicity of identity allows individuals to embrace their various roles within different contexts, enriching the understanding of their vinterconnectedness with others and the planet.

What is ahead

In this publication, we will explore various processes and activities in our work as educators and facilitators through the lens of regenerative practice. While some initiatives may already be contributing to regenerative systems, it is essential to identify gaps and areas requiring redesign to foster the regeneration of ecosystems, communities, and society at large.

The focus is not merely on sustaining current systems but on healing and restoring them to create healthier, more resilient environments. By embracing facilitation, dialogue, and holistic approaches, we aim to engage deeply with our communities and promote meaningful changes that benefit both people and the planet. Through these efforts, we can cultivate a culture of regeneration that recognizes the intrinsic connections between identity, community, and the environment.

To fully grasp the essence of regenerative practices, we must first navigate the intricate and dynamic tapestry of our world's context. In the following readings, we will explore how regeneration requires us to embrace complexity, acknowledging the interwoven relationships between ecological, cultural, and social systems. This perspective invites us to see ourselves not as isolated entities but as integral components of a broader ecosystem, where each action echoes throughout the community and environment.

Words Matter

Sustainable development —

the UN, within the ESD for 2030 framework, defines sustainable development as the harmonious integration of environmental, social, and economic dimensions to ensure the well-being of present and future generations. This vision aligns with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on protecting natural ecosystems, promoting social equity, and fostering economic prosperity. Sustainable development, in this context, emphasizes transformative education that empowers individuals and communities to make informed decisions, take responsible actions, and shape a more resilient and sustainable world, ensuring that development benefits everyone while preserving the planet for the future.

Relational identity

refers to the understanding of self that emerges from relationships with others. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and groups, highlighting that identity is not solely a personal construct but is shaped by social interactions, cultural contexts, and communal affiliations. In community work, fostering a sense of relational identity can enhance collaboration, empathy, and shared purpose among community members.

Community healing

refers to collective efforts to restore and strengthen the social fabric of a community after trauma, conflict, or systemic injustice. It involves creating spaces for dialogue, mutual support, and reconciliation, allowing individuals and groups to process shared experiences and rebuild trust. Community healing is essential for fostering resilience and promoting mental and emotional well-being within communities.

Regeneration,

as defined in sustainability contexts, refers to the process of restoring and renewing ecosystems, economies, and communities to a state of greater health, vitality, and resilience. It involves not just sustaining current levels but actively replenishing and improving natural and social systems, allowing them to thrive and evolve over time. This concept extends beyond sustainability by focusing on healing, renewal, and long-term flourishing. According to the regenerative development framework, regenerative processes focus on the restoration of natural systems, the enhancement of biodiversity, and the creation of socially and economically just communities. It prioritizes circular, restorative practices that repair damage to ecosystems, rather than simply preventing further harm, and ensures that human activities contribute positively to the planet's capacity to support life.

Reconciliation

is the process of restoring relationships and fostering understanding between individuals or groups that have experienced conflict, division, or harm. It often involves acknowledging past injustices, facilitating dialogue, and working toward forgiveness and healing. In community work, reconciliation can be a critical step in addressing historical grievances, building trust, and creating a more equitable and harmonious community. These concepts are interconnected and play vital roles in fostering healthy, resilient communities that prioritize collaboration, healing, and sustainability.

A Regenerative economy

is an economic model that focuses on sustainability and resilience, emphasizing the restoration and regeneration of natural systems and social structures. It aims to create a circular economy where resources are reused, waste is minimized, and ecosystems are restored. This economic approach values long-term well-being over short-term profits, prioritizing community well-being, environmental health, and equitable economic practices.

Belonging theory

in community work poses that individuals have an inherent need to feel connected and accepted within a group or community. This theory emphasizes the importance of fostering inclusive environments where all members feel valued, respected, and part of the community. In practice, belonging theory guides community workers to create supportive networks, promote diversity, and facilitate interactions that enhance social cohesion and mutual support.
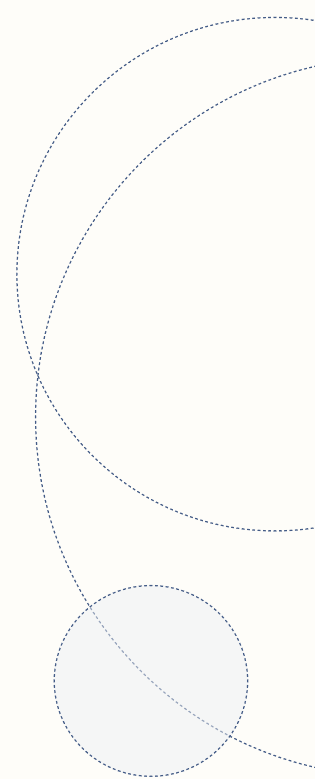
Unpacking Complexity:
Beyond The Buzzword —
What It Truly Has To Do With Us

Corinna Thiel and Dagmar Hoder

In feminist and indigenous contexts, the circle represents a rejection of hierarchical structures, embracing a more inclusive and cooperative way of being. This concept resonates deeply within systems thinking, where the circle offers a way to engage complexity and collective wisdom. By bringing everyone into a shared space of dialogue, we create a more holistic, interconnected understanding of the challenges we face.

In a world marked by rapid change, complexity, and interconnected crises — climate breakdown, social inequity, political instability — our challenges are no longer isolated problems with simple solutions. They are deeply interwoven, requiring a shift in how we think and respond. Developing systems thinking is essential to navigating this complexity. It allows us to see the bigger picture, recognize patterns, and understand the ripple effects of our actions within larger ecosystems. But systems thinking cannot remain an individual skill. It must be brought into our communities, where collective wisdom and shared perspectives can help us address these multifaceted crises. By embracing systems thinking together, we not only become better equipped to grasp the complexity of our world, but we also learn to co-create solutions that are inclusive, sustainable, and resilient. In community, this practice fosters collaboration, nurtures innovative problem-solving, and empowers us to take meaningful action in the face of uncertainty.

In this reading, we present 12 explore-the-topic cards derived from an article on complexity created by project partners and facilitators Dagmar Hoder and Corinna Thiel. Each card includes a carefully curated reading insight gathered from our discussions on various topics. You can print the cards on recycled paper to share and enjoy with the groups you facilitate. These small analog artifacts help keep knowledge accessible and encourage periodic reflection.

Words Matter

Complexity

refers to the state of being intricate or complicated, characterized by a multitude of interconnected elements that interact in unpredictable ways, leading to emergent properties and challenges in understanding or managing a system.

Systems thinking

is an approach that views a system as a cohesive whole rather than merely a collection of parts, emphasizing the relationships and interdependencies among those parts. It incorporates feedback loops and interactions, facilitating a deeper understanding of dynamic processes and their implications.

Self-awareness

is the conscious knowledge of one's own character, feelings, motives, and desires, enabling individuals to reflect on their behavior and its impact on others. It involves the ability to introspect and recognize one's internal states, enhancing emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication.

A feedback loop

is a process in which the outputs of a system are fed back into the system as inputs, allowing for adjustments and changes in response to performance or outcomes. It refers to the mechanism through which behaviors are modified based on the consequences they produce, influencing future actions and reinforcing or diminishing certain behaviors.
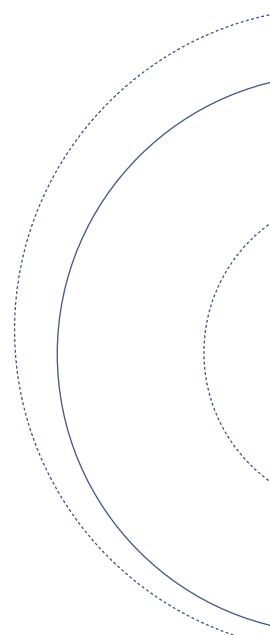
Complexity: How it Affects Us as Individuals and Communities 1

The complexity of our world arises from a combination of diverse life and cultural variations, interconnected systems, advanced technologies, global interdependence, natural unpredictability, information overload, and a natural tendency for chaos. As we grow more aware of the fragility of our systems, the crises and suffering in the world can often make us feel helpless. In these readings, we share thoughts on how to cope with these challenges.

John H. Holland: Often regarded as a pioneer in the study of complex adaptive systems, Holland developed the concept of genetic algorithms and contributed significantly to understanding how systems evolve and adapt.

Inquiry invitation

How do you define complexity and where do you notice it in your life?

The Butterfly Effect 2

Let's explore the nature of complex systems. Have you heard of the "butterfly effect"? In complexity theory, this term illustrates how small actions can have huge, unpredictable consequences — like a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil potentially causing a tornado in Texas. This highlights how interconnected and unpredictable our world truly is.

Edward Lorenz is credited with developing the concept of the Butterfly Effect. Lorenz was an American mathematician and meteorologist who made significant contributions to the field of chaos theory. In the early 1960s, while working on weather prediction models, Lorenz discovered that tiny changes in initial conditions could lead to vastly different outcomes.

Inquiry invitation

Can you think of an occasion when your action had an unexpected and unintended outcome? How do you feel about taking responsibility for these unforeseen outcomes?

Interconnected Systems and Interdependencies 3

We live in a web of interdependencies, where the effects of actions are often hard to predict. Research on coupled human and natural systems shows intricate patterns that emerge only when these systems are studied together. Interactions between humans and the environment depend on geography, time, and organizational structures, with historical choices shaping current and future outcomes.

Fritjof Capra is widely regarded as one of the most influential theorists and authors in the study of interconnected systems. His work has significantly shaped our understanding of how various systems — biological, ecological, social, and economic — are interrelated and interdependent. "The Web of Life" (1996): Introduces the concept of living systems and systems thinking, emphasizing the complexity and interdependence of ecological and social systems.

Inquiry invitation

What examples can you identify where historical choices have shaped current systems in your community or the world?

Fragility of Human Systems to Natural Hazards 4

In an age of climate crises, we see how fragile human systems are to natural hazards. While these events may seem uncontrollable, it's not the hazards themselves that cause disasters, but how they intersect with human vulnerabilities — like deforestation, urbanization, and poor infrastructure. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, these human actions worsen the impact of floods, earthquakes, and storms.

In "Antifragile", Nassim Nicholas Taleb explores how certain systems, unlike fragile ones, actually benefit and grow stronger from volatility, shocks, and stressors. Taleb introduces the concept of antifragility, which goes beyond resilience or robustness. Whereas resilient systems resist damage and maintain stability, antifragile systems thrive under chaos and uncertainty.

Inquiry invitation

What in your opinion do communities need to become stronger and more adaptable in the face of challenges? What specific factors or conditions must be present to enable this growth?

Human Decisions and Disasters

5

Disasters are not isolated occurrences; they are deeply influenced by our decisions. The scale of destruction is shaped by the choices we make as individuals and communities. This knowledge, instead of fostering despair, brings hope. By changing our behaviors, we can reduce risks, prevent disasters, or lessen their impacts.

One of the most famous and impactful books addressing the role of human decisions in disasters is "The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism" by Naomi Klein. Published in 2007, this book delves into how governments and corporations exploit crises — natural disasters, economic upheavals, and wars — to implement controversial policies that often favor corporate interests at the expense of vulnerable populations.

Inquiry invitation

In times of crisis, what support systems do you rely on? How do these systems contribute to your ability to cope?

Managing Complexity in Communities

6

Managing a complex project or community can feel like herding cats — each element or person has its own mind, and coordinating them can be frustrating. In human communities, individuals, organizations, and institutions all have their own goals, values, and behaviors, yet they constantly influence one another.

In her writings, Margaret J. Wheatley has addressed the challenges of leadership and community organization in complex systems. Her book "Leadership and the New Science" explores how traditional management practices fall short in the face of complexity, likening the management of people to "herding cats" due to the inherent unpredictability of human behavior.

Inquiry invitation

How do you cope with the frustration of unpredictability when leading or participating in a group where everyone seems to go in different directions?

Interactions and Feedback Loops in Communities

7

For example, economic policies can shape education systems, which in turn impact health and social cohesion. Increased interaction between different cultures can enrich communities by blending traditions, languages, and customs, but it can also create conflict. Community actions can lead to feedback loops, with positive loops amplifying change and negative loops stabilizing the system their impacts.

In the book "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love" bell hooks examines how societal expectations of masculinity affect both men and women. She discusses the feedback loops that arise in gender interactions, emphasizing the need for love and emotional connection to transform these dynamics.

Inquiry invitation

Can you think of an example where a decision made by leaders created a feedback loop within your community?

Personal Complexity within Communities

8

On a personal level, we each bring emotions, experiences, traumas, needs, and expectations to our communities. This adds layers of complexity. Even our family and friendships function as complex systems, influenced by factors both internal and external. Communication within these systems is multifaceted, requiring skills and awareness to ensure understanding and clarity.

Bessel van der Kolk's in the "The Body Keeps the Score" highlights the interconnectedness of trauma and its profound impact on communities. He illustrates how individual traumas ripple through social dynamics, affecting relationships and emotional climates within groups. Van der Kolk emphasizes the crucial role of community support in healing, advocating for holistic approaches that consider both individual and communal factors. Effective communication and understanding of trauma's effects can foster empathy and enhance community cohesion, ultimately facilitating recovery and resilience.

Inquiry invitation

Can you think of an example of collective or historical trauma that has affected your community? How has this trauma influenced the community's identity, values, and behaviors?

Self-Awareness and Interaction

9

Self-awareness is key, as our internal states shape how we interact with the world and determine the effectiveness of the changes we contribute. Thus, the complexity of our world presents both challenges and opportunities, requiring us to adapt, collaborate, and innovate to navigate an increasingly interconnected global context.

Kiran Bedi is an Indian politician, social activist, and retired Indian Police Service (IPS) officer known for her advocacy in police reform and community service. In her book "I Dare!", Bedi shares her experiences and emphasizes the importance of self-awareness in leadership and personal development. She recounts her journey as a trailblazer in a male-dominated field, highlighting how understanding her emotions and motivations shaped her effectiveness. Bedi argues that self-awareness is crucial for effective leadership and community engagement, enabling individuals to navigate complex social dynamics and drive positive change.

Inquiry invitation

What practices help you strengthen your self-awareness?

Murphy's Law of Technology

10

The more complex a piece of technology, the more likely it is to malfunction at the worst possible moment. Similarly, our brains can only process a limited amount of information, yet we're bombarded by vast amounts through the internet and media. Sorting through this flood of data adds another layer of complexity, especially when making decisions. A major challenge in this age of information overload is fake news — false or misleading information presented as legitimate. Fake news erodes public trust in reliable sources, making it difficult for people to differentiate between truth and falsehood. This undermines trust in key institutions like government, healthcare, and education, and leads to cynicism and division.

In "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism," Shoshana Zuboff explores the complexities of digital technology and its impact on society in the wake of the pandemic. She examines how the proliferation of data and surveillance technologies has increased the likelihood of misinformation and manipulation, making it more challenging for individuals to make informed decisions. Zuboff highlights the risks associated with our dependence on complex systems and the urgent need for critical awareness in the age of information overload.

Inquiry invitation

What criteria or tools do you use to evaluate the credibility of news or social media posts?

The Infinite Monkeys Theorem

11

The Infinite Monkeys Theorem humorously suggests that, given infinite time, a group of monkeys typing randomly could eventually produce Shakespeare's complete works. Complexity theory shows that randomness and infinite possibilities can sometimes give rise to order and brilliance.

In today's world of endless information, we face the dilemma of how to make informed choices. By acknowledging and respecting complexity, we can embrace different perspectives and open ourselves to new solutions. Understanding complexity allows us to better comprehend the people and systems around us, whether in our families, communities, or broader society.

In "Race After Technology," Ruha Benjamin explores how randomness in technology can lead to systemic biases. She shows how complexity can create both harm and opportunity, urging us to recognize these dynamics to foster more equitable systems. Benjamin's work reflects the Infinite Monkeys Theorem by illustrating how random processes in technology can unintentionally produce discrimination, but also offers the potential for innovative, just solutions when complexity is acknowledged.

Inquiry invitation

How can embracing complexity result in growth and positive change? Can you think of some examples?

Empowering through Education and Empathy

12

By recognizing and respecting complexity, we open ourselves to diverse perspectives and solutions. Understanding the interconnected nature of our partners, communities, and society enables us to make better decisions in daily life, education, and addressing ecological and societal challenges. We need a new generation of facilitators who embrace systems thinking and apply it in practice, working not only with direct target groups but also within the broader ecosystem. As educators, facilitators, or mentors, we must adopt a holistic approach — fostering real participation, empathy, and critical thinking. By shifting perspectives and engaging with complexity, we empower people with the skills they need to thrive in an interconnected world.

Gertie Pretorius is a South African psychologist focused on integrating trauma-informed practices into education. She emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence and self-awareness for children, particularly in underprivileged communities. In "Emotional Intelligence for Children and Teens," Pretorius offers practical strategies for educators and parents to cultivate empathy and resilience, empowering youth to navigate complex environments. Her work exemplifies how trauma-informed, holistic approaches can help students thrive despite socio-economic challenges.

Inquiry invitation

What are the skills and competencies needed for navigating and thriving in complexity? What do you already have? What do you want to develop?

Dilemmas, Paradoxes, and Education in Postmodern Thought: BANI vs FIRE

Julian Czurko and Maxim Smekhov

Navigating in a complex world

The concept of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity), first introduced in 1987 during the Cold War, has gained renewed relevance in recent years. In the 2020s, a new framework called BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible) emerged. While VUCA captures the world's unpredictability, BANI[2] highlights the emotional impact of living in such a complex environment — how it leaves many of us feeling lost and unsure of how to navigate it.

Both VUCA and BANI reflect long-standing challenges that are now deeply embedded in everyday life. Understanding how to face these obstacles is crucial, not only for improving our work but also for safeguarding our mental, social, and physical well-being.

In today's world, where fluidity of identity and intersectionality are finally acknowledged, defining who we are — and what the world is — has become more complex. This is an official mark of the postmodern era described in recent philosophical ideas. While embracing this fluidity, we often struggle with self-understanding. Creating frameworks to navigate these complexities can feel overwhelming, as each one forces us to question and reevaluate our relationship with ourselves and others.

If we open our minds to new possibilities, we can create alternative models for understanding the world. For instance, PAID (Precariousness, Alienation, Inequity, Displacement) reflects instability and exclusion, while FIRE (Fragmentation, Isolation, Rigidity, Exclusion) underscores the disintegration of unity and the rigidity of inequality. ROSE (Resilience, Oppenes, Solidarity, Empathy) champions strength in adversity and collective empathy, while CHAIN (Conformity, Hierarchy, Anxiety, Injustice, Neglect) and HAIL (Harm, Alienation, Invisibility, Loneliness) point to the psychological and structural impacts of oppression. Finally, BASE (Belonging, Accountability, Solidarity, Equity) emphasizes shared humanity and justice.

By adopting diverse perspectives, we can find the model that resonates with us in the moment. Some frameworks keep us grounded and connected to our communities, while others inspire hope and a sense of interconnection. Ultimately, it's about choosing the view that feels most relevant, acknowledging that no single model holds all the answers, but each offers valuable insights to help us navigate our complex world.

From grand narratives to uncertainty

As societies democratize and move away from autocracies, power becomes more dispersed, shifting responsibility to individuals. Not everyone is prepared for this burden, especially in the face of complex power dynamics like resources, laws, and political systems. This shift was explored by Jean-François Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition, where he described the collapse of "grand narratives" — the overarching beliefs in progress, rationality, and ultimate freedom that once guided societies. After World War II, the disintegration of these narratives became apparent, revealing the everyday nature of conflict and uncertainty.

Lyotard's ideas sparked debates, particularly in academic and artistic circles, and eventually led to the concepts of VUCA and BANI. These frameworks now influence social consciousness, media, and management practices. Yet, traditional education still relies on grand narratives to teach history, literature, and even science, aiming for coherence and rationality.

This creates a disconnection for young people, who often feel unprepared for the complexities of the modern world. They criticize schools for focusing too much on memorization instead of equipping them with the skills to handle real-world challenges. Educators now face the task of integrating these new realities into their teaching, helping students develop the competencies needed to navigate uncertainty while still drawing on traditional

[2]Cascio, Jamais. "Facing the Age of Chaos: Being Human in a BANI World." Medium, 2020. Available at: https://medium.com

Exploring the landscape of VUCA and BANI

Let's look at the models in more detail, as both are valuable tools for understanding the dynamics we face today. They also highlight the growing disconnection between traditional education systems and the real-world skills young people need to navigate these challenges. The table below offers a comparison of these two frameworks.

VUCA	concept	BANI
Describes modern world processes, organizational challenges, and societal dynamics.	focus	Focuses on personal experiences and emotional responses to the world's complexity.
Developed in 1987 by leadership experts Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus.	origins	Coined by futurist Jamais Cascio in 2020, inspired by recent global crises.
Volatility: Rapid, unpredictable changes. Uncertainty: Lack of foresight and planning. Complexity: Interconnected, diverse systems. Ambiguity: Confusion from conflicting information.	key elements	Brittle: Fragile systems prone to collapse. Anxious: Long-term stress from uncertain risks. Non-linear: Unpredictable outcomes. Incomprehensible: Difficult to understand without specialized knowledge.
Acknowledges decentralized, dynamic systems; challenges of managing change are ongoing.	worldview	Reflects personal feelings of stress, fear, and uncertainty within a complex, overwhelming world.
The need for interdisciplinary learning to manage complexity and ambiguity. Without this, misinformation and polarization thrive.	impact on education	Traditional education avoids uncertainty and unpredictability, leading to a gap in preparing youth for real-world challenges.
Highlights global societal shifts that people must navigate collectively, moving away from grand narratives.	emotional context	Captures individual stress, anxiety, and frustration, often worsening as systems break down.
Preparing students for a world that's constantly changing, requiring them to understand interconnected systems and think critically.	educational challenge	Helping students manage anxiety and uncertainty in an unpredictable world, equipping them with coping skills for resilience.

The education system faces a significant challenge in addressing the realities of both VUCA and BANI. While young people may not fully grasp VUCA, they live its effects daily. To navigate this, they need interdisciplinary skills. Without adaptation, education leaves students vulnerable to misinformation, polarization, and escalating conflicts, particularly harming marginalized groups who face scapegoating and aggression. BANI, on the other hand, reflects the personal price of an uncertain world, capturing collective fears about large-scale crises, BANI offers a more pessimistic view, focusing on the social and emotional impacts.

Traditional education, designed for predictability and structure, often falls short in preparing young people for these real-world complexities. This disconnect only heightens their anxiety as they face a world with demands far beyond exam preparation, requiring a new set of skills for a rapidly changing reality.

By shifting the educational focus from knowledge acquisition to fostering self-awareness, relationship-building, and emotional development, we begin to see the importance of dialogue as an educational approach. Engaging in dialogue, collective exchange, and the sharing of knowledge within a community setting can help address the challenges and limitations modern education faces. This nurtures interpersonal skills but also creates a space for collaboration and mutual support, equipping young people with the tools they need to navigate the complexities of today's world.

Strategies for educators

To address the anxiety and tension arising from the BANI or VUCA perception, we invite you to explore six key strategies we've gathered that guide us in designing learning spaces and educational processes. Along with the methods included in the pocket toolbox, these strategies offer an opportunity to not avoid difficult conversations with young people, but to engage with them directly, tackling painful sentiments together.

1. Dialogue: Honest, respectful conversation fosters understanding. By embracing diversity and complexity, participants can share openly, allowing difficult emotions and confusion to be named. While solutions may not appear immediately, dialogue normalizes facing challenges, offering both compassion and support from the community.

2. Gratitude: Practicing gratitude, even for small things, promotes acceptance and invites a compassionate mindset. By acknowledging what exists in life, gratitude helps make a chaotic world feel more manageable, fostering a sense of emotional balance. Gratitude isn't just forcing ourselves to think positively; it's about recognizing and appreciating the good things that already exist in our lives. They are part of the picture but it is not so easy to notice them because our brain is "wired" to seek out what might be harmful to us, so it remains focussed on the negative ot problems around us. Whereas gratitude is something one needs to foster in order to have more.

3. Creativity: Small acts of creativity — writing, art, movement — transform burdensome emotions into expression. These acts of creativity not only help individuals but also create an inviting space for others to co-create and participate, strengthening community bonds.

4. Vulnerability: Embracing vulnerability allows people to express their fears, uncertainties, and emotions without judgment. This fosters deeper connections within communities and creates a foundation for collective healing and growth.

5. Compassion: Practicing compassion, both for oneself and others, helps to soften the edges of anxiety and tension. Compassionate action strengthens interpersonal connections and offers valuable support in times of struggle.

6. Community participation: Active involvement in one's community builds a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Engaging in community efforts, however small, fosters solidarity and helps individuals feel grounded and supported by collective efforts to navigate uncertainty.

Final thoughts

In this handbook, we explore dialogue as a regenerative approach. It helps young people meet challenges with a "soft front" — approaching the world with openness and empathy — while maintaining a "strong back," supported by a resilient community where they can be authentic. In this space, they can be dreamers, and their personal stories, along with the complexity of their identities, are valued and appreciated.

Young people today face constant dilemmas and paradoxes, caught in the dynamics of rapid change, and witnessing environmental, social, and even humanity crises[3]. At the same time, they are asked to balance individual aspirations with societal expectations, stability with innovation, and personal identity with collective belonging. These tensions can feel overwhelming, but by engaging in dialogue and reflection, they learn to embrace complexity rather than avoid it. This practice strengthens not only individual growth but also collective resilience, helping them confront life's uncertainties with confidence and connection.

On-the-ground insight

A pocket toolbox to address the topic with young people
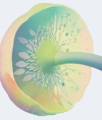
Exercise 1: Exploring opposites

Participants present their "opposite statements" and receive feedback, engaging in collective inquiry.

Steps:
1. Break into small groups, sharing ideas (option A) and its opposite (option B).
2. Group members offer insights and ask clarifying questions.
3. Rotate participants to expose them to different perspectives.
4. Reflect on learning gained from balancing both ideas and holding both truths.

Outcome: Encourages embracing paradox and the complexity of multiple truths.

Example 1: Discuss "staying in school" (option A) versus "dropping out to support the family" (option B), balancing both truths from different life contexts.

Example 2: Explore "pursuing gender equality" (option A) versus "traditional gender roles" (option B) in communities that might resist change, emphasizing the importance of inclusion and breaking down stereotypes.

---

[3] This notion has been increasingly prominent as the world faces significant conflicts such as the Russian aggressive invasion of Ukraine, ongoing violence in Gaza, the civil war in Sudan, and multiple other crises in places like Myanmar, Ethiopia, and the Sahel region. Leaders, organizations like the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and media outlets are using terms like "humanitarian crises" or "humanity crises" to describe these cumulative disasters.

Exercise 2: Critical uncertainty mapping

Use critical uncertainty mapping to explore opposite ideas, mapping how different uncertainties affect the topic.

Steps:
1. Identify two key uncertainties (e.g., "certainty of education" vs. "uncertainty of the job market").
2. Create a map where these uncertainties form the axes of a grid.
3. Place potential outcomes or actions in different quadrants.
4. Discuss implications of uncertainties on decision-making.

Outcome: Helps visualize and explore tensions between conflicting ideas.

Example 1: Mapping how the uncertainties of getting a degree may not lead to a stable job for youth from low-income families.

Example 2: Mapping the uncertainties around climate change (e.g., "taking action now" vs. "doing nothing") and discussing how young people's anxiety over environmental crises can affect mental health, especially among refugees and vulnerable communities already facing instability.

Exercise 4: Living with uncertainty

Circle practice creates a safe space for sharing and deep listening on uncertainty.

Steps:
1. Sit in a circle and take turns sharing a personal story of uncertainty, using a talking piece to facilitate reflection.
2. Reflect on common themes and how people navigated uncertain situations.
3. Discuss strategies for managing uncertainty and highlight that it's a shared experience.

Outcome: Builds empathy, resilience, and a sense of shared humanity around uncertainty.

Example 1: Sharing stories of uncertainty around housing stability, such as facing eviction or not knowing where the next meal will come from.

Example 2: Participants share experiences of climate anxiety or stories about seeking asylum as refugees, connecting how environmental crises can lead to forced migration and ongoing uncertainty in life.

Exercise 3: Wicked questions (liberating structures)

Wicked questions invite participants to explore paradoxes and tensions by crafting a question that holds both opposites.

Steps:
1. Formulate a wicked question (e.g., "How can we value both community and individual success?").
2. Brainstorm answers that honor both sides of the paradox.
3. Discuss how this tension shows up in real life and how to navigate it.
on decision-making.

Outcome: Reveals underlying complexities of conflicting ideas and encourages deeper inquiry.

Example 1: "How can we honor both individual success and community support in neighborhoods with high poverty rates?"

Example 2: "How can we ensure both inclusion of refugees and support for local communities?" — exploring the tension between integration efforts and local concerns, while emphasizing the need for intersectionality and inclusive policies.

Exercise 5: Iceberg model

Use the iceberg model to explore uncertainty by examining surface events and deeper systemic causes.

Steps:
1. Identify a specific moment of uncertainty and place it at the top of the iceberg (visible event).
2. Explore patterns, underlying structures, and mental models.
3. Discuss how understanding these layers can help navigate uncertainty.

Outcome: Encourages recognizing the underlying complexity behind uncertain situations.

Example 1: Exploring an event like being denied a job due to lack of resources, and examining deeper systems like education inequality or racism.

Example 2: Exploring a community's struggle with the effects of climate change (e.g., natural disasters), looking at how deeper systemic issues like global inequality, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of government support compound the effects, and how this affects marginalized and vulnerable populations the most.

On-the-ground insight

Meeting The World in Crisis: Cultivating Hope and Mindful Responses

Bětka Wójcik

We live at a time that might be described as a polycrisis: a confluence of multiple, interconnected crises that collectively emerge and challenge our ability to respond and navigate . From the climate and biodiversity crises, which have led to the mass extinction of species, to the rise of extremism, growing divisions, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, wars and conflicts in different parts of the world. Our world nowadays is shaped by trauma from social injustice, patriarchal domination, racism and colonialism.

These are not separate issues but interconnected topics which affect our reality, our choices and our lives. But how can we navigate, thrive and live our lives whilst facing the overwhelming complexity of the polycrisis? How can we learn to use these crises to transform and move toward a more sustainable future? How can we make good choices in the face of such challenges?

Navigating the polycrisis requires an understanding of its complexity. The scale and interdependence of these issues can be overwhelming, and might cause the feeling of fear, pressure, urgency and confusion, making it difficult to find a path forward. It might also lead to burnout and giving up on taking any action.

There are no easy answers, and it is not the aim of this article (and the entire publication) to give you any. However, I have collected in this article a few thoughts and inspirations that support me in not getting lost and in continuing meeting the world in crisis and hoping for the change that could lead to the life that sustains us all.

Spoiler: Here's an anti-checklist to review before reading about hope

- **Identify your type of hope:** Consider what kind of hope you currently hold. What do you hope for in your actions — specific outcomes or a deeper purpose?

- **Assess motivation:** Reflect on how your hope influences your motivation to act. Do you feel motivated by the possibility of a better future, or do you find strength in your values?

- **Check current engagement:** Assess your current level of engagement in the process. Are you focusing on immediate actions that matter today or waiting for a distant future?

- **Acknowledge present needs:** Identify real needs and opportunities in your community. Which issues have come up that require action? What potential can you observe?

- **Evaluate challenges:** Assess how current challenges impact your sense of hope. Which obstacles make it hard for you to maintain hope, and how can you address them?

- **Clarify your values:** List the core values that motivate your efforts. What motivates you to take action? What values are important to you?

- **Embrace uncertainty:** Recognize uncertainty as part of the process. How can you view uncertainty as an opportunity for learning and growth?

- **Create engagement strategies:** Develop strategies to stay engaged despite challenges. What can help you to stay engaged and connected to your purpose?

- **Seek inspiring narratives:** Engage with stories and examples that inspire resilience. Which narratives or role models add to the sense of purpose behind your efforts?

- **Commit to action:** Make a commitment to take at least one actionable step. Which issues resonate with you, and what action can you take today? What is one concrete action you can take this week which aligns with your values?

Hope

Hope is one of the key words when we think about engagement, activism, and taking action for change and transformation. We use this word in various contexts, but does it always mean the same thing? It seems there are different types of hope, and I want to highlight two: one that supports resilient activism and one that can even hinder it.

On-the-ground insight

In a small village in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the scars of war still lingered. Ethnic tensions had divided the community, leaving families estranged and friendships shattered. Similar to many places affected by conflict, individuals yearned for the days when laughter filled the air and neighbors supported each other without hesitation.

In Sarajevo, local residents began transforming their neighborhoods through community gardens after the Bosnian War. These gardens became vital spaces for dialogue and reconciliation, where former neighbors came together to cultivate the land. As they planted seeds, they also shared their stories, gradually mending the social fabric of their communities.

Across the globe, the Seeds of Peace organization has been working since 1993 to foster understanding among youth from conflict regions like the Middle East and South Asia. By bringing together young leaders for dialogue and leadership training, the organization has empowered participants to initiate peace-building projects in their communities. Their collective hope and commitment to understanding illustrate the transformative power of shared purpose.

In Rwanda, the aftermath of the 1994 genocide brought immense challenges. However, grassroots initiatives like the "Umuganda" program encouraged community members to work together to rebuild infrastructure and promote cooperation. These efforts helped bridge ethnic divides, fostering a sense of unity and resilience as the nation worked toward recovery.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, many residents started community gardens to reclaim their neighborhoods and promote food security. Projects like the "Garden of Hope" have brought together residents from diverse backgrounds, creating spaces for education and empowerment. Through these gardens, communities have found a way to heal and rebuild, demonstrating that hope can flourish even in the aftermath of disaster.

In Colombia, "Peace Villages" have emerged as a response to decades of armed conflict. These villages focus on reconciliation, peace education, and sustainable development, enabling former combatants and victims of violence to work side by side. Through workshops, community events, and shared agricultural projects, participants cultivate not only the land but also a shared commitment to healing and hope.

Additionally, in Afghanistan, women have formed cooperatives to empower themselves economically and socially. Focusing on agriculture, handicrafts, and education, these cooperatives allow women to support their families while fostering community ties. By working together, they create spaces of resilience and hope in challenging environments, proving that unity and collaboration can lead to positive change.

When hope becomes action

The first type of hope is hope for a better future. In the face of a polycrisis — whether environmental, social, or political — this hope can easily be crushed. When the future seems bleak, many people understandably feel discouraged. This kind of hope, often characterized by a passive longing for change, can lead to disillusionment when change doesn't materialize. Its focus on the future may even distract us from addressing present realities, causing us to overlook immediate needs and available resources. When confronted with overwhelming challenges, such as the climate crisis, this "things will get better" narrative can feel like a mirage, deepening feelings of helplessness.

In contrast, the second type of hope embodies a deeper trust in meaning and purpose, rooted in reality, in the here and now as it is. It encourages us to believe that our actions, however small, are worthwhile despite uncertain outcomes. The community gardens, peace initiatives, and cooperatives mentioned earlier may be examples of this kind of hope. The individuals involved didn't wait for an ideal future; they took action based on their values in the present, nurturing not only their projects but also their relationships and community ties. This hope empowers us to connect with our values, acknowledge our circumstances, and engage with our communities in meaningful ways.

Vaclav Havel, the Czech writer and statesman, summarizes this idea: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." This type of hope can strengthen our resilience and empower us to take meaningful, hopeful actions in areas that matter to us.v

Transformation that truly matters

As activists, we hear and respond to calls for change and transformation. There are many actions being taken all over the world. But why, in many cases, don't they bring lasting change?

----
[4] Miki Kashtan's "Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness: Transcending the Legacy of Separation in Our Individual Lives"

Change and transformation often fail to last because they address only superficial symptoms rather than the deeper, interconnected issues. When we rely on dualities like good/bad, us/them, or right/wrong, we simplify complex problems and overlook the underlying patterns that sustain them. In fact, these dualities can even prolong or perpetuate the very problems we aim to solve. For transformation to be meaningful, it must go deeper than surface-level changes. This requires recognizing the connection between inner transformation and social change, while also identifying and addressing the deep roots of the problems and challenges we seek to face.

Inner transformation and social change are closely linked. Engaging in inner transformation involves noticing and acting on the internal processes that shape our thoughts and behaviors. This self-awareness is crucial because our inner state deeply influences how we interact with the world and it affects the quality of the change we contribute to. However, inner transformation alone is not enough. If we only focus inward, we risk ignoring the real suffering of others and we unintentionally maintain systems of oppression and domination. Personal growth must lead to outward actions that reduce the pain and injustice faced by others, ensuring that our transformation contributes to meaningful, collective change.

On the other hand, if we focus only on external change and transformation, we may unintentionally recreate the same patterns and problems we are trying to solve. Without inner work, our actions might be driven by the same biases and fears that sustain systemic problems. Inner transformation helps us approach social change with humility, compassion, and a deeper understanding of complexity. It enables us to avoid the traps of simplistic dualities and the recreation of old patterns that underlie the challenges we face. To co-create meaningful change, we must work in parallel: transforming our own beliefs, thoughts, and actions, while also learning to interact differently with others within interpersonal relationships and througout broader social change.

"If we don't engage in inner work, our attempts at changing the world will likely replicate the very structures of domination and control we seek to transform. When we embrace our vulnerability and release the need to control, we open the door to the possibility of deeper connection, both with ourselves and with others. It is in this space of openness that true aliveness and transformation can flourish."[4]

From reactivity to thoughtful responsiveness

In a world of polycrisis and challenges, we encounter many triggers, and we often react quickly without the awareness of what truly matters to us or a greater understanding of our capacities and resources. Cultivating awareness of our emotional and mental states is essential for fostering resilience and meaningful responses. The following table summarizes the key concepts to maintain balance, honor personal limits, and nurture a sense of purpose. By focusing on stress awareness, staying within our capacities, and engaging in collective healing, we can create more sustainable and impactful actions.

ASPECT	CORE UNDERSTANDING	POSITIVE SHIFTS
Stress & trauma awareness	Be aware of your stress and trauma responses to better understand your reactions.	Supports individual navigation of challenges, fosters collaborative culture, enhances creativity, and deepens engagement.
Staying within capacities	Recognize and honor personal limits to prevent burnout and overextension.	Leads to more resilient actions, challenges oppressive systems, strengthens collective capacity, promotes deeper social transformation.
Awareness of feelings & needs	Maintain awareness of changing feelings and needs to make more conscious choices.	Supports self-regulation, enables better decision-making, enhances emotional well-being.
Connecting to meaning & purpose	Reflect on values and vision to sustain deeper engagement and resilience.	Provides a sense of direction and helps maintain motivation through challenges.
Community & safer spaces	Engage with the community to create safer and brave spaces for emotional processing and growth.	Offers support, allows for vulnerability, learning, and competence-building in a safe environment.
Mourning, healing, & transformation	Address individual and collective trauma to break cycles of suffering and acknowledge unmet needs.	Promotes healing, builds resilience, serves as a catalyst for change, and fosters emotional growth and transformation.

On-the-ground insight

The reading below illustrates a mindful response during times of crisis. It emphasizes recognizing our own limits and boundaries while remaining engaged in the causes that matter to us. The statement "7 Points on The War and Dialogue" was developed by Ukrainian mediators and dialogue facilitators during the ongoing Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This statement invites reflection on whether dialogue is always possible in situations of conflict, highlighting the importance of careful consideration of conditions, available support, context, and timing. These points underscore the necessity for sensitive, context-aware, and locally-led processes of dialogue.
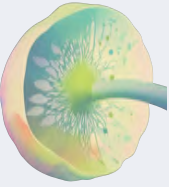
7 POINTS ON THE WAR AND DIALOGUE[5] from Ukrainian mediators and dialogue facilitators

Some key points include:

- Voluntary nature of dialogue: Dialogue must be a voluntary, not a forced process. Premature or imposed dialogue during conflict can cause harm and deepen divisions.

- Asymmetry and trauma: Dialogue between citizens of conflicting sides (here Ukraine and Russia) during active hostilities can retraumatize participants due to the extreme emotional and psychological stress of war.

- Contextual sensitivity: Dialogue methodologies must be tailored to local contexts and the ongoing war context. Without conflict sensitivity and local ownership, applying external peacebuilding approaches might be ineffective and potentially harmful.

- Protection from propaganda: Dialogue must be safeguarded from manipulation, particularly given Russia's use of "peace" narratives as propaganda since 2014.

- Future conditions for dialogue: Preconditions such as accountability for war crimes and ensuring the safety of participants are critical for meaningful future dialogue.

- Do no harm principle: Dialogue must not be initiated in ways that could harm or retraumatize participants, particularly given the high stress and emotional toll of war.

- Resilience and social cohesion: The current landscape of dialogue and mediation is primarily taking place within Ukraine, focusing on building social cohesion and resilience. International dialogues should aim to foster mutual understanding between Ukraine and its global partners.

Final thoughts

In the journey toward meaningful responses, a diverse range of perspectives can offer valuable insights and practical tools. The checklist below features essential readings that explore various aspects of trauma awareness, resilience, and community healing. From holistic psychology to trauma stewardship and somatic healing, these selected works provide foundational knowledge and strategies for fostering personal and collective well-being. Whether you're seeking self-care practices or insights into community resilience, this list serves as a starting point for deeper exploration.

Reading Checklist

- Vulnerability, empathy
  "The little book of courageous living" by Miki Kashtan

- Holistic psychology
  "The body keeps the score" by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk

- Trauma stewardship
  "Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others"
  by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky

- Psychoanalysis & trauma theory
  "The trauma of everyday life" by Dr. Mark Epstein

- Somatic healing & mind-body connection
  "Waking the tiger: Healing trauma" by Peter A. Levine

- Community healing & collective trauma
  "Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds" by Adrienne Maree Brown

- Resilience & burnout prevention
  "Burnout: The secret to unlocking the stress cycle" by Emily Nagoski
  and Amelia Nagoski

- Trauma and healing
  "The politics of trauma: Somatics, healing, and social justice"
  by Staci Haines, Ai-jen Poo, and Richard Strozzi-Heckler

- Trauma and society
  "The wisdom of trauma" by Gabor Maté

- Stress and disease
  "When the body says no: Exploring the stress-disease connection" by Gabor Maté

- Somatics and social justice
  "Somatic transformation and social justice" by Generative Somatics

Words Matter

Stress & trauma responses

Emotional, mental, and physical reactions triggered by challenging or traumatic experiences.

Resilience

The quality of dealing with life's obstacles and unexpected changes. Set of skills and competencies needed to bounce back and return to equilibrium after a difficult or traumatic event which makes it possible for us to re-establish connections and take action towards safety within ourselves and with others.

Burnout

A state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.

Trauma stewardship

The practice of caring for oneself while working in trauma-exposed environments, ensuring sustainability in helping roles.

Somatic healing

A therapeutic approach that focuses on the body's role in processing and healing trauma.

Holistic psychology

A branch of psychology that integrates mind, body, and spirit in the understanding and treatment of mental health.

Collective trauma

Trauma that affects a group or community, often due to widespread events like disasters or systemic oppression.

Community healing

The process of addressing trauma and emotional wounds within a group, focusing on collective support and resilience-building.

Safe (enough) spaces

Environments where individuals can express themselves, process emotions, and heal, with a sense of safety and support.

Brave space

An environment where individuals are encouraged to engage in open, honest, and sometimes uncomfortable dialogue, with the understanding that growth and learning require vulnerability and discomfort.

Mourning

A way to process losses related to unmet needs, fostering self-awareness, healing, and deeper connections.

Radical acceptance

A mindfulness practice of fully accepting reality as it is, without judgment, to foster resilience and peace.

Embodying The Connection with Myself and Others through Nonviolent Communication

Bětka Wójcik

Personal story: a journey of connection through memory pictures

have been working in the field of youth participation, co-creating diverse projects and programs in Poland and Georgia. Recognizing and understanding the diverse needs of individuals and groups is key when fostering participation; however, simply knowing that others have different needs, and even accepting or aiming to meet them, doesn't necessarily lead to real connection. It doesn't fully capture the essence of true participation and togetherness. Nonviolent Communication (NVC) has been for me this "missing piece" and it has given me concrete tools to live it.

Exploring NVC has been an adventure that has touched every single area of my life. Throughout this journey, I have experienced many moments in which I have felt truly "at home," and others in which some missing pieces have found their place. Below, I will share a few pictures from my memory from this path of exploration connected to my educational practice.

Picture 1: I still remember the first time I heard one of Marshall Rosenberg's quotes: "Connection before correction." It touched me deeply and resonated with a deep longing for authentic connection, especially in the context of education and relationships between adults and children. How often do we focus on correction first? What are we afraid of — losing influence, losing control? Is there a different way?

Picture 2: NVC invites us to see the world without labels. Imagine how it could change your work with young people if you truly saw the person in front of you — not as a "child" or a "young person," but simply as who they are. And what if you could show up as yourself — not as an "adult" or "leader," but just as who you are today? These labels often come with expectations and certain behaviors. What would it be like to let them go? I'm not here to play a role — I'm here to be myself. And you're not here to fulfill a role — you're here to be you.

Picture 3: The quotation by Eckhart Tolle — ""The more past there is in a relationship, the more present you need to be."" — still supports me in moments when I feel I already know everything about someone. It is so easy to have an opinion and a picture already formulated. How would it be to truly see them without judgments and diagnoses? By approaching each interaction with fresh eyes and an open heart, we allow space for authentic connection and understanding, fostering deeper relationships built on presence rather than preconceived notions.

Picture 4: "What is alive in me? What is alive in you? What can we do to enrich life?" These are the main questions of NVC. It is not about enriching my life or your life. It is about enriching life in general and the shared essence of life that connects us all. Both mine and your needs are involved in it.

Picture 5: "We need empathy to give empathy." This phrase reminds me of sharing and giving from a place of abundance rather than scarcity. Only when we cultivate empathy within ourselves can we share it fully with others. True giving comes from a wellspring of understanding and connection, rather than a sense of obligation or deficiency.

The approach:
Nonviolent Communication
and its essence

"See me beautiful", a song, written by Red and Kathy Grammer and used by Marshall Rosenberg at his workshops, encapsulates the heart of Nonviolent Communication (NVC):

See me beautiful, look for the best in me.
That's what I really am, and all I want to be.
It may take some time, it may be hard to find,
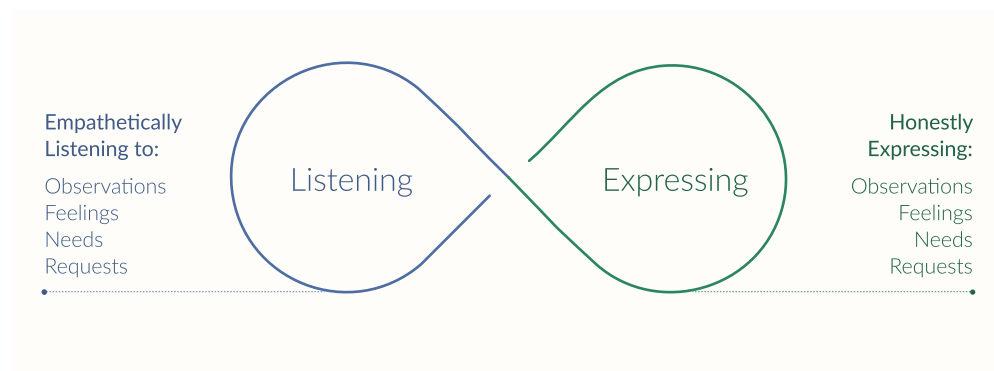*But see me beautiful.*

See me beautiful, each and every day
Could You take a chance? Could You find a way?
To see me shining through in everything I do
And see me beautiful.

These words invite us to see the beauty in ourselves and in others. Imagine how it would feel to hear these words from others — to hear them in what people say to you. How would it feel if they could hear them in your words? And how would it be to speak them to yourself?

Seeing the beauty of needs in others and ourselves is the heart of NVC. Developed by Marshall Rosenberg, NVC is a holistic communication process that fosters connection on the level of feelings and needs — both to ourselves and to others.

It is not just about "understanding" the needs of others or accepting them. It's about connecting to our common humanity and the universal needs we all share, regardless of age, gender, or background. NVC emphasizes embodied connection, helping us tune into our bodily sensations, emotions and energy of needs. By noticing our body sensations, we can identify our feelings, which connect us to what truly matters to us at any given moment. Through NVC, we can become more aware of these processes and allow the natural flow of life to unfold.

Awareness of one's own needs as well as those of others leads to connection and awakens the desire to enrich life through meeting them. Marshall Rosenberg captured this idea when he said: "The purpose of Nonviolent Communication is to create a quality of connection that allows for people to give to one another out of compassion — the natural joy we feel of contributing to one another's well-being."

Empathetically
Listening to:

Observations
Feelings
Needs
Requests

Listening   Expressing

Honestly
Expressing:

Observations
Feelings
Needs
Requests

In practice: the four-step
model of NVC

NVC offers a practical tool, a four-step model for life-serving communication, which can be seen as a map to help establish connections with ourselves and others. This model includes:

1. Observation (instead of judgments): We observe what is happening without judgment or interpretation. By separating facts from our evaluations, we create space for connection.

2. Feelings (instead of thoughts): Our body sensations and emotions are clues to our met and unmet needs. While others' actions may trigger these feelings, they are not the cause. Each feeling points to a need, and all feelings are equally important.

3. Needs (instead of strategies): Needs are universal values shared by all people. They drive our actions and underlie everything we say or do. Strategies are specific ways to meet those needs, but they should not be confused with the needs themselves.

4. Requests (instead of demands): Clear, specific, and doable requests rooted in needs increase the likelihood of meeting them. Unlike demands, requests are open to "no" as a response and consider all needs involved.

This map can be used for self-reflection (to raise awareness of our own feelings and needs), empathetic listening (to explore the feelings and needs of the other person) and honest expression (to communicate what truly matters to us).

Talking about dialogue in the other articles of this handbook, we would like to highlight the NVC approach as a profound compass for our reflections, sense-making and holding spaces for dialogue. We value its principles and the aliveness of it. It is not just a method, but a way of being. It guides us to create connections that enrich life, allowing both our needs and the needs of others to be honored, creating a foundation of empathy and mutual understanding. It goes together beautifully with other broader approaches we are presenting in this Handbook such as systems thinking, holistic facilitation, Art of Hosting, as well as regenerative or trauma informed approaches.

We offer a Toolkit, as part of this Handbook, where we share Nonviolent Communication (NVC) lists of feelings and needs. You can print them out and use them to raise awareness of your own feelings and needs, as well as explore and guess the feelings and needs of others. Be sure to also check the self-empathy and empathy practices in the article "Regulate, Reconnect, Reflect."

15 Reasons to Take Dialogue Seriously: A Pathway to Transformative Learning

Bětka Wójcik, Julian Czurko,
Marta Gawinek Dagargulia, Maxim Smekhov

Dialogue serves as the ceremony of conversation, nurturing the roots of our shared humanity. Unlike the conventional idea of growing toward the summit of a mountain, true growth happens downwards, where trees strengthen themselves by intertwining their roots. In this way, our dialogue fosters deep connections that reflect our true selves and cultivate our communal growth.

collective insight

Words matter

Dialogue

is a process aimed at fostering a deeper connection with both one's own feelings and needs, as well as the feelings and needs of others. Its main purpose is establishing the connection and searching for mutual understanding achieved through empathic listening and honest expression. In dialogue, we don't listen to respond but to understand better, to reach the deeper level of needs and values behind the words and opinions. It allows people to show up in their authenticity and complexity. In practice, dialogue can have various structures or formats. In a group setting, it may be supported by facilitators who hold the process.

In a world marked by relationship crisis — systemic oppression, racism, violence and the growing dynamics of othering — dialogue emerges as a grounding practice that invites us to connect on a deeply human level. It is more than an exchange of words or opinions; it is a space for vulnerability, empathy, authenticity and experiencing common humanity across divides.

As we navigate these turbulent times, we recognize that continuing dialogue is essential. This means engaging with those who challenge our beliefs, hold differing opinions, and even confront us and trigger discomfort. By engaging in this process, we can bridge divides and cultivate our relational identities, recognizing that our sense of self is profoundly shaped by our connections with others.

Through dialogue, we can counteract othering, inviting deeper understanding and appreciation for the unique narratives we all bring and building the sense of belonging despite differences.

As we work in the domain of education, non-formal learning, and facilitation, we also see dialogue through the lens of learning design — where the potential for transformation can truly unfold. Dialogue becomes not only an approach, a tool, but also a framework for learning and evolving together.

In this article, we will explore 15 compelling reasons to take dialogue seriously as a transformative practice, creating spaces that honor diversity, foster relational identities, strengthen communities and lead to deeper, generative learning.

Reason 1: Dialogue as transformation: harnessing the power of conversations for change

When we talk, we are not just communicating; we are creating a bridge between souls.

Indigenous Proverb

In our educational practice, dialogue is more than just a technique or method; it's a fundamental part of our approach. It helps us to build inclusive environments where diverse voices are heard and valued.

Dialogue enables us to address complex issues in a personal and meaningful way. It helps us look beyond surface-level positions to understand the deeper reasons behind our viewpoints and to engage with challenging topics outside of a simple black-and-white perspective. In the context of change and transformation, dialogue allows us to reflect on our own motivations, needs, and intentions that guide our actions. It fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Drawing from the iceberg model, we see dialogue as a way to work across all levels of awareness, from superficial actions and behaviors to deeper layers of beliefs, values, and hidden assumptions that influence our lives. Dialogue allows us to move beyond exchanges and delve into the underlying motivations and intentions that shape our perspectives and actions.
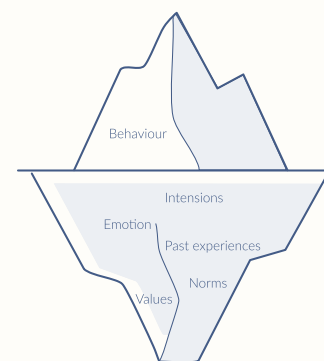
Inquiry invitation

What change would you like to contribute to through dialogue?

Reason 2: Dialogue as a foundation for collective action and resilience

Not everything that is faced can be changed.
But nothing can be changed until it is faced.

James Baldwin

The change and transformation we want to see in the world is so big and so deep that we cannot do it alone. It requires collective effort, and for this, understanding each other is essential. To understand different positions and the deeper motivations behind them, an authentic connection with others is needed. Engaging in meaningful dialogue cultivates strong relationships, fostering a sense of belonging that is essential for community resilience during challenging times.

The convergence of these meanings in the word "dialogue" opens up new perspectives. Dialogue involves a dispersed logos that is not confined to one place or person. This suggests that we may carry fragments of some truth, and through conversation, we can reconstruct a larger, shared understanding. It could also mean that there is no single Truth, but rather individual truths and beliefs that we can explore with curiosity and focus. This exploration is not about collecting these truths and beliefs and reconstructing a whole. This is not possible since they might have different roots and sources. It's rather about appreciating the colorful complexity and individual character of each part. It's more like creating a mosaic.

In education, the process of learning thrives when individuals come together to share and explore diverse viewpoints, allowing people to engage with complex ideas and to build a deeper, more interconnected understanding that goes beyond isolated knowledge. This quality of collective engagement and exchange fosters the generation of innovative ideas which allow us to address crises, shared challenges, and community life, where collective wisdom and intelligence can be truly valued and embraced.

Inquiry invitation

Dialogue about what topics could help strengthen your community? Which important topics are being avoided and why?

Reason 3: Inclusivity through dialogue in education

Inclusion is not just inviting someone to sit at your table. It is believing they belong there.

Mia Carella

The dialogical approach in educational work focuses on empowering people, creating a space where their voice can be heard, and modeling attentiveness and a genuine willingness to understand. This approach allows people to engage with questions without preconceived answers and to experience authentic curiosity and acceptance. Dialogue also involves encountering diversity, experiencing different ranges of emotions, and facing conflicts while opening up to multiple perspectives and diverse personal experiences. It allows us to show up as we are.

In education, for instance, this inclusive approach means that learners, regardless of their experiences or beliefs, are encouraged to share openly and explore ideas together. This helps them feel respected and recognized, reinforcing their sense of worth and belonging. In essence, dialogue contributes to inclusion by honoring each unique perspective and ensuring that every voice can be taken into consideration in shaping collective understanding and decisions.

The facilitator's task is to create a welcoming space where all individuals can contribute and share openly. This involves taking into consideration additional needs for support, diverse backgrounds, existing power dynamics and personal intersectionality.

This is what we call inclusion in practice — not just in words but in action. It involves designing the learning space intentionally, doing the groundwork to understand each participant's needs, and sharing guiding principles in advance with everyone involved.

Words Matter

A clearer distinction should be made between dialogue and ideology. Linguistically, ideology also relates to "logos," meaning knowledge or worldview. However, ideology is defined and shaped by a specific idea — one that is perceived as true and necessary, a singular narrative meant to definitively explain reality. Dialogue opposes this approach, as it fosters doubts, proposes alternatives, and introduces multiple voices and equal perspectives instead of a single, dominant narrative.

Inquiry invitation

Whose voice in your community isn't heard? Whose perspective would you like to hear and learn from?

Reason 4: Embracing complexity through dialogue

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

Rumi

Dialogue is not just a static concept but a dynamic space for seeking narratives and meanings. In dialogue, individuals can enhance the awareness of their own needs and values, learn to express them, listen and contribute by exploring both their commonalities and their differences. The diversity within these differences is valuable, as it contains energy and thought that provoke further inquiry, stimulate curiosity, exploration, and empathy. Rather than presenting a contradiction of ideas, this complexity enriches the learning process by offering a variety of perspectives. Embracing this diversity allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation of multiple viewpoints, encouraging open-mindedness and fostering a more inclusive environment for learning and growth. Complexity theory suggests that diverse perspectives foster emergent insights, allowing participants to uncover underlying assumptions and patterns that might otherwise remain hidden. Dialogue, as a holistic approach and concrete tool allows this potential to emerge. This ongoing process strengthens learning environments, making them adaptive and responsive to new insights. Embracing complexity within dialogue helps us build resilient communities where diversity and change become sources of strength rather than obstacles.

Inquiry invitation

What types of complexity does your community experience? How would having a dialogue about these complexities, before focusing on solutions make a difference?

Reason 5: Fostering empathy through dialogue

*Empathy allows us to re-perceive our world
in a new way and move forward.*

Marshall Rosenberg

Empathy refers to a specific quality of presence that connects us with others. In this kind of presence, we listen to the feelings and needs behind the words of the other person. Through this, the other person can be deeply understood, heard, and seen within their experience. Empathy doesn't mean having the same feelings or agreeing; it involves a respectful acknowledgment of what others are experiencing.
Empathy helps us connect to the universal level of needs, even when we don't fully understand someone's positions, actions or behaviors. This connection allows us to focus on shared humanity, transform conflict situations while searching for win-win solutions and building a sense of belonging in diverse communities. In designing learning spaces, this empathetic presence plays a pivotal role. If we apply empathy to how we shape educational environments, we begin to see them not just as physical spaces but as emotional and psychological ecosystems. Learning spaces, whether virtual or physical, can be transformative when they are designed to meet both the intellectual and emotional needs of learners.

Inquiry invitation

Think of an opinion or position that you find difficult to understand or accept. What feelings and needs do you think the person behind that opinion might have? What might be motivating them and what might they long for?

Reason 6: Dialogue as a ceremony of human connection and presencing[6]

*Presencing means to connect from the source of the highest
future possibility and to bring that possibility into the now.*

Otto Scharmer

Dialogue can be seen as a ceremony of human connection, a process that invites participants to slow down and engage on a deeply human, eye-to-eye level. The ceremonial quality of dialogue is reminiscent of how ancient communities gathered in circles, where the space itself fostered understanding and connection. This ceremonial aspect is not merely a symbolic gesture, but a conscious commitment to engaging in mindful, intentional conversation. It involves creating an environment where individuals are encouraged to "host" themselves first — bringing their full presence, inner awareness, and openness to others.

This practice of mindful dialogue goes beyond simply exchanging ideas; it becomes an act of inner work. It requires participants to connect with themselves and to be fully present with others, cultivating a shared space of mutual respect and empathy. Otto Scharmer, in his work on Theory U, describes this as presencing — a state of heightened awareness where individuals are connected to their deeper selves, to others, and to the broader ecosystem, including the planet itself.

Through dialogue, this kind of presencing occurs naturally. Participants are not only engaging in conversation, but also acknowledging their relationship with everyone and everything in the space — the people, the environment, even the subtle energy and atmosphere that surrounds them. This awareness can shift perspectives, enabling individuals to see beyond their personal worldview and become more aware of their interconnectedness with the collective. In this way, dialogue becomes transformative, broadening the scope of self-understanding.

Inquiry invitation

What would change in your life if you regularly asked yourself about your own feelings and needs, as well as those of others?
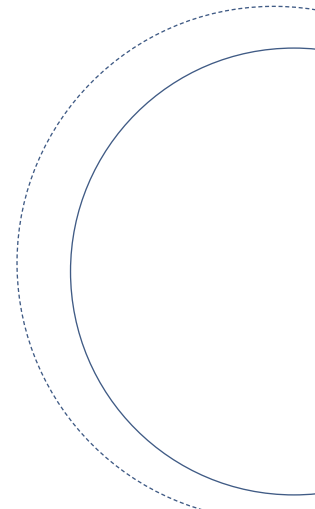
[6]Scharmer, C. Otto. Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges. 2nd ed., Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016

Reason 7: Authentic learning in dialogue — embracing vulnerability

If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive.

Brené Brown

Vulnerability is essential for authentic learning, as it invites us to embrace uncertainty and focus on what truly matters. In education, it creates safer spaces for learners to explore, ask questions, and engage deeply. Vulnerability is essential for dialogue as it helps us share our true selves and listen deeply to others, fostering meaningful connections. This openness transforms learning into a collaborative and transformative process.

When learners feel safe enough to be vulnerable, they are more willing to take risks, ask tough questions, and challenge their assumptions, leading to richer and more authentic learning experiences. This also builds emotional resilience and self-awareness, helping learners develop a stronger sense of self and navigate challenges both inside and outside the learning space or classroom.

Inquiry invitation

Think about your experiences — what helps you feel safe enough to be vulnerable? This could include your own capacities or the support you receive from others.

Reason 8: Dialogue as a space for creative ideas and innovation

When individual listening is ingrained in collective culture, the whole community is more likely to shine.

Jacqueline Novogratz

Dialogue serves as a catalyst for collective learning, where the power of collaboration naturally emerges from the shared exchange of ideas, perspectives, and experiences. It fosters an environment where individuals can co-create knowledge and solutions, amplifying the potential for growth and innovation. This collaborative spirit seamlessly aligns with the principles of collective leadership, where responsibility and decision-making are distributed across a community, enabling moral leadership that is rooted in the pursuit of common good. In this way, dialogue becomes not just a method for learning, but a vehicle for building communities that grow, learn, and thrive together.

Dialogue nurtures creativity by encouraging divergent thinking. In an open and inclusive space, participants are more likely to take intellectual risks, explore unconventional ideas, and experiment with new possibilities. This atmosphere of creative freedom is essential for innovation, as it allows for the cross-pollination of ideas from different disciplines and backgrounds, leading to novel solutions that might not arise in more rigid or hierarchical settings.

Furthermore, dialogue fosters adaptability. Engaging with diverse perspectives and unresolved tensions encourages participants to embrace ambiguity and complexity, which are essential skills in navigating the uncertainties of innovation processes. This ability to stay open to evolving ideas and situations ensures that innovation is not only sparked but sustained, allowing individuals and teams to continuously iterate and refine their ideas in response to new insights and challenges. Through dialogue, innovation becomes a dynamic and ongoing process, rather than a fixed goal.
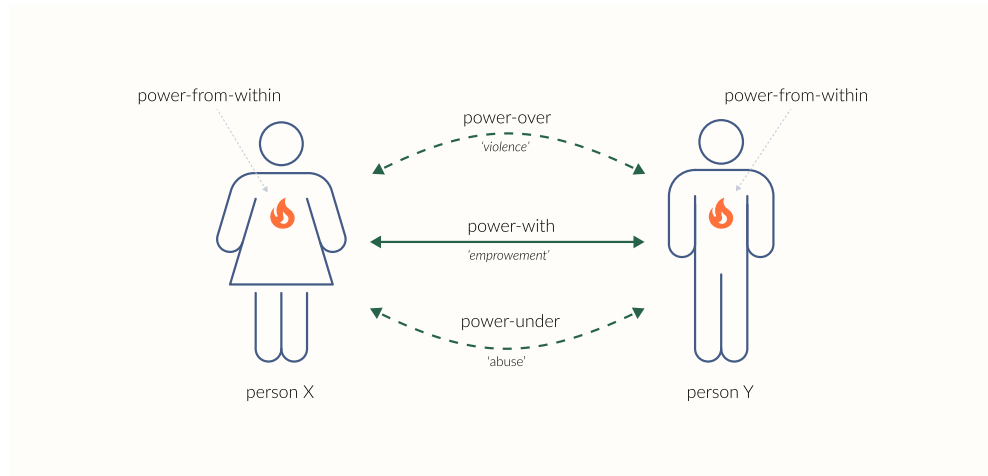
Inquiry invitation

Can you recall a moment when a very strong and innovative idea emerged collectively? What was unique about the space that allowed this to happen?

Reason 9: Breaking the power-over

Power-Over leads to punishment and violence. Power-With leads to compassion and understanding, and to learning motivated by reverence for life rather than fear, guilt, shame, or anger.

Marshall Rosenberg

An essential condition for dialogue is awareness of the various power dynamics that may influence the conversation. Liberating structures[7] define power as access to resources—like position, knowledge, eloquence, or confidence — that can skew conversations. Miki Kashtan defines power as "the capacity to mobilize resources to attend to needs". When one group holds more of these resources, it creates "power-over" others, silencing voices and limiting true exchange. To foster meaningful dialogue, it's crucial to recognize and address these imbalances, moving towards "power with," where all participants can contribute equally. This shift creates a shared learning process, enabling deeper, more transformative conversations that promote mutual understanding and growth. With this awareness, dialogue allows for the creation of spaces across power differences.

power-from-within

power-over
'violence'

power-with
'empowerment'

power-under
'abuse'

person X

person Y

Inquiry invitation

How do you recognize the presence of power differences within the group?
As a facilitator, how can you react to this situation and support the group in moving towards the "power-with" dynamic?

[7]SMcCandless, Keith, and Henri Lipmanowicz. The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures: Simple Rules to Unleash A Culture of Innovation. 2013

Reason 10: Openness to change in dialogue

True dialogue can only happen if I enter the conversation willing to be changed by it. If I am unwilling to change, to be affected sufficiently to consider options new to me, on what grounds am I expecting the other person to change?

Miki Kashtan

In today's increasingly polarized world, many people are trapped in ideological "echo chambers," where they only encounter views that reinforce their existing beliefs. True dialogue, with openness to change, acts as an antidote to this polarization by encouraging the exchange of diverse perspectives. When individuals are willing to question their own views, it reduces rigid thinking and fosters greater social cohesion, helping to build a more inclusive and harmonious society.

The ability to change one's mind through dialogue fosters cognitive flexibility, which is essential for personal resilience in the face of life's unexpected challenges. People who regularly engage in open, transformative conversations are better equipped to adapt to new information and shifting realities, helping them navigate uncertainty with ease and maintain a mindset which fosters growth. True dialogue, however, requires participants to enter with a willingness to be changed. Facilitators and participants alike play a crucial role in fostering openness by asking thoughtful, non-judgmental questions that can shift mindsets and attitudes. This creates space for reflection and the transformative power of deep listening, where participants feel truly heard, reconsider assumptions, and embrace new viewpoints, fostering both personal and collective growth.

Openness to change enhances learning and education by encouraging critical thinking, self-reflection, and exploration of new ideas, deepening understanding and promoting holistic development. It also plays a key role in ethical decision-making, allowing individuals to reconsider their values and assumptions in light of new perspectives. This helps ensure that decisions are not self-serving but take into account the well-being of others.

Additionally, the willingness to be changed by dialogue nurtures a culture of lifelong learning by cultivating intellectual humility — recognizing that no one has all the answers. In conflict resolution, especially in deeply entrenched disputes, openness to change is critical. It allows parties to listen without the need to "win," creating space for healing and reconciliation, as seen in restorative justice, where the goal is to repair relationships and restore harmony.

Words Matter

An echo chamber

is "an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own." The term is a metaphor based on an acoustic echo chamber, in which sounds reverberate in a hollow enclosure.

Inquiry invitation

Can you recall a situation in which you changed your opinion as a result of a conversation with another person? What makes this possible? What stands in the way?

Reason 11: Cultivating deep relationships as the core of dialogue

All real living is meeting.

Martin Buber

At the heart of effective systems change lies the pivotal role of relational work in fostering collective dialogue, healing, and regeneration within society and communities. Traditional, technical approaches to systemic issues often fall short because they fail to address the deeply human aspects of transformation. By prioritizing relationships, we move beyond transactional models and invite deep, empathy-driven connections that make meaningful change possible. Collective impact efforts must center relational practices that support mutual understanding and inner change. Through common learning processes grounded in trust, respect, and compassion, these efforts can facilitate the dialogue necessary to address complex social challenges and create lasting, transformative change.

Inquiry invitation

How can we take care of trust in dialogue? What is our relational work strategy?

Reason 12: Dialogue is a mindful response

The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said.

Peter Drucker

The etymology of the word "responsibility" can be traced to Latin roots. It derives from the Latin word "responsus", which is the past participle of "respondēre", meaning "to respond" or "to answer". The suffix "-ability" (from the Latin "habilis," meaning "capable of") suggests a capability or capacity to perform a certain action. Thus, "responsibility" essentially means the capacity or ability to respond to or answer something.

This capacity is nurtured through dialogue, as engaging in conversations deepens our understanding, enhances our compassion, and shifts our focus from merely "being right" to "getting it right." Deep listening, in particular, becomes a practice of holding space for others without judgment, emphasizing understanding over reaction. As Viktor Frankl suggests, there should be a gap between stimulus and response, and deep listening helps us create that space. This practice allows us to respond thoughtfully, rather than impulsively.

In dialogue, reflective listening plays an essential role because it prioritizes comprehension over immediate replies, fostering deeper connections. Compassionate listening, in turn, transforms empathy into active support, empowering us to help, heal, and create positive change within the group and in the world around us.

Inquiry invitation

When you're triggered in an everyday situation, what strategies help you regulate and create space between the stimulus and your response?

Reason 13: Transforming conflict and othering through dialogue

To practice the process of conflict resolution, we must completely abandon the goal of getting people to do what we want.

Marshall B. Rosenberg

In times of conflict — whether in ongoing wars, societal divisions, or daily confrontations — dialogue holds the potential to transform the deeply ingrained patterns of "othering" that arise as a reaction to fear, difference, and uncertainty. As Pruitt Bettye and Philip Thomas highlight in Democratic Dialogue, conflicts often surface due to unmet needs, competing narratives, and the erosion of trust[8]. In the chaos of these divisions, we become deep-seated in an "us vs. them" mindset, dehumanizing the other and fueling further disagreements. Dialogue offers a path to disrupt this cycle by providing a space to surface hidden tensions, address core needs, and rebuild relationships based on shared humanity without a need to compromise one's own feelings and needs. It allows us to move beyond surface-level reactions. Through this process, dialogue can begin to heal wounds, dismantle polarizing barriers, and restore the trust needed to regenerate a more peaceful, inclusive society. To regenerate society and foster social change, we must understand how to incorporate this acknowledgment into the design of learning spaces, community programs, and capacity-building initiatives.

Where media sensationalism and political rhetoric often simplify complex issues into binary oppositions, dialogue invites nuance, complexity, and humanization into the conversation. It allows individuals to critically reflect on the stories they are told and, through direct engagement, challenge the polarizing agendas that thrive on maintaining divisions. By encouraging people to share their personal truths and confront misinformation, dialogue can disarm manipulation, offering an antidote to propaganda and help societies resist the forces that fuel conflict and societal fragmentation.

According to Nonviolent Communication, developed by Marshall Rosenberg, conflicts stem from the strategies we choose to meet our needs, not from the needs themselves. Rosenberg explains that human needs are universal — love, safety, respect, and connection — and are behind everything we say and do and all people share these same needs. Conflict occurs due to the specific strategies or actions people employ to fulfill those needs. Through authentic dialogue we can reach this level of universal needs and seek connection to transform the conflict situation.

Inquiry invitation

Think about a polarizing topic in your community. What feelings and needs might people on both sides of this divide have?

---

[8]Pruitt, Bettye H., and Philip Thomas. Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners. Quebec: Canadian International Development Agency, 2007.

Reason 14: Supporting choice and conscious decision-making through dialogue

Authentic dialogue inspires choices that honor both self and others.

Martin Buber

Dialogue creates the foundation for making conscious choices that are deeply rooted in personal needs and values, moving beyond surface-level opinions and worldviews. Instead of just expressing what we want, we are able to connect to the deeper "why" behind it and share this with others. This creates a unique space where, despite significant differences in what we desire or how we approach things, we can more easily understand the shared needs and values underneath and also take them into consideration while making our own choices.

By creating a space where everyone can connect to their own feelings and needs while also listening to and connecting to the feelings and needs of others, dialogue helps us make more thoughtful and lasting decisions that reflect a deeper sense of connection and responsibility to both ourselves and our community.

While the primary goal of dialogue isn't necessarily to reach a specific decision or common solution, the authentic connection and empathy established through dialogue often lead to a desire for cooperative outcomes. In many situations, this creates a pathway to mutually beneficial or "win-win" solutions. When people feel truly heard and understood, they are more likely to make choices that not only align with their own needs but also respect the interconnectedness and needs of everyone involved.

In a connected world marked by complexity, the decisions we make have far-reaching consequences across social, environmental, and systemic levels. Dialogue offers a space to reflect deeply on the impact of our choices, aligning them with a broader understanding of the ecosystems we inhabit. Through dialogue, we can cultivate mindfulness and awareness of the relationships between our actions, the natural world, and our communities.

By engaging in dialogue, individuals and groups can collectively explore not only which decisions to make, but also how those decisions affect others and how they align with the core values and needs. This supports decision-making processes that prioritize the well-being of the entire system, allowing for more ethical, informed, and regenerative outcomes.

Inquiry invitation

Reflect on a recent decision you've made. What motivated you to make it? What needs were behind your choice? Did you consider the needs of others in that situation? If not, what might their needs be? How could you take those needs into consideration? Think of three possible solutions.

Reason 15: Dialogue as a system change approach: collective practice that aligns us with both visible and invisible

Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion.

bell hooks

Systems thinking takes a holistic view, focusing on the interconnectedness and interdependence of all parts within a system. Rather than linear cause and effect, it emphasizes how components interact through feedback loops and complex relationships. Similarly, the ecosystem approach sees organizations, communities, and environments as evolving, interconnected systems, urging us to view the "big picture" and consider the broader context.

In this approach, reflection is not just introspection but involves engaging with the entire ecosystem through dialogue. This ongoing process helps us recognize feedback loops and hidden dynamics, shaping our understanding of the system. Dialogue allows us to listen deeply, not just to individual voices but to the relationships and histories that shape the system. Reflection, therefore, is a collective practice that aligns us with both visible and invisible forces, helping us respond in sync with the system's growth.

A system is like a living forest, where trees, plants, animals, and soil form a web of interdependence. Reflection, in this metaphor, is like pausing to observe the entire forest, seeing both the visible and hidden elements. It's an evolving practice that deepens our awareness of these connections, enabling us to adapt to new challenges with greater insight.

Today, Indigenous wisdom is increasingly recognized for its alignment with systems thinking, emphasizing interconnectedness, balance, and deep ties to the natural world. This worldview helps us see life as a web of relationships, where all elements — people, history, nature — are interconnected. By integrating these perspectives, we move beyond technical analysis to a more holistic, respectful way of working within complex systems, aligning our actions with natural and cultural rhythms for sustainable change. Dialogue plays a critical role in this process by serving as the bridge that connects individual insights with collective understanding, fostering deeper collaboration and enabling the co-creation of solutions that are aligned with the system's evolving needs.

Inquiry invitation

What have you learned about your role in a system through your experiences with dialogue?

Final thoughts

Dialogue, as discussed, serves as a profound mechanism for fostering deeper relational and cognitive shifts, making it integral to transformative learning in various environments — be it personal development, organizational growth, or community engagement. The essence of transformative learning is rooted in the ability to question existing assumptions, engage with diverse viewpoints, and cultivate empathy, all of which are central to dialogical processes. Through dialogue, individuals can move beyond surface-level knowledge, exploring the underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape their worldview, thus enabling profound personal and collective transformations.

At a meta-level, this approach reshapes the very nature of how we design learning. Dialogue shifts the focus from an individual acquisition of knowledge to a co-creative process that values relational identity, emotional intelligence, and inclusivity. It opens up learning spaces where the power is shared, and every participant contributes to the collective understanding, making learning an emergent, participatory process. This is not about transferring information but about generating new insights through collective inquiry and embracing the complexity of human experience. For facilitators and leaders, the challenge lies in designing environments that support this depth of engagement, where vulnerability and openness to change are not only encouraged but seen as essential components of transformative growth. This dynamic approach cultivates resilience, adaptability, and a sense of interconnectedness, which are critical in addressing the multifaceted challenges of the modern world.

Qualities and principles that dialogue brings to education:

- **Partnership:** Treat participants as partners, not just receivers, and share with them the responsibility for the learning process.

- **Clarity and transparency:** Be clear about roles and the process to build trust in the group.

- **Focus on relationships:** Learning is not just about achieving the learning goal. Prioritize relationships to enhance motivation and engagement.

- **Active listening and empathy:** Listen and understand participants' needs. Take them into consideration, and if that's not possible, at least acknowledge them.

- **Mutual learning:** See education as a shared journey of learning from each other. Share with participants what you are learning from them and how they enrich your life.

- **Boundaries and consent:** Respect boundaries and ensure informed participation.

- **Shared responsibility:** Shift from a system of punishments and rewards to one that understands interdependencies and the natural consequences of actions.

To further reflect on the opportunities of dialogue, we invite you to engage in a brief reflective exercise. This self-assessment will allow you to reflect on your practice and answer the questions honestly, reflecting on the ideas discussed in the article. We believe that this self-check can help you reconnect with your role as a facilitator and become more mindful in designing spaces for dialogue. While answering the questions, imagine the particular space you facilitated or the particular challenge you were working with.

In considering following statements, where do you stand?

not at all — completely!

- I intentionally design an inclusive space that accommodates diverse backgrounds, unique needs, and ensures every voice feels heard.

- I create a safe and vulnerable environment that encourages participants to explore uncertainty and take intellectual risks.

- I am aware of and addressing power dynamics within the group, working towards a "power-with" dynamic for equal participation.

- I integrate Nonviolent Communication (NVC) principles, focusing on mutual understanding and connection rather than winning arguments.

- I am fostering openness in dialogue, where participants (including myself) are willing to be influenced and changed by the conversation.

- I practice deep, compassionate listening, ensuring participants feel understood beyond surface-level opinions.

- I implement strategies that deepen empathy and trust, building meaningful relationships that enhance dialogue and collective learning.

- I am prepared to manage conflict and complexity as opportunities for growth, guiding the group toward deeper understanding and collaboration.

- My learning space encourages co-creation and collective resilience, empowering participants to work together on shared challenges.

- I design reflective practices that honor both individual insights and the broader group's growth, ensuring sustained transformation.

Scoring: If you lean towards green in more than five questions, you're on the path to unlocking the full potential of dialogue!

On-the-ground insight

As we explore the various aspects of dialogue, let's examine the comparative table that highlights what dialogue is in contrast to debate. Under each aspect, we also provide an example from our practice and experiences, which showcases the polarities of approach between dialogue and debate. After reviewing the table, we invite you to explore the terms related to discussion, debate, and dialogue, offering other short definitions to further understand methods in group communication.

ASPECT	DIALOGUE	DEBATE
Definition	A conversation aimed at strengthening mutual understanding and connection. Feminist and LGBTQI+ groups hosting healing circles or listening sessions where participants share lived experiences and support each other in mutual understanding.	A structured contest of opposing viewpoints, the goal is to convince the other part by winning arguments. Public debates on gender equality where panelists argue over the legality of issues like gender quotas or marriage equality.
Purpose	To explore ideas, deepen understanding, and build relationships. At an Indigenous reconciliation circle, participants engage to understand the historical trauma faced by Indigenous peoples and work toward healing and connection.	To persuade others and defend a specific position or argument. At a corporate diversity training debate, employees argue about the effectiveness of inclusion policies, seeking to prove which policies are superior.
Approach	Open, inclusive, and non-judgmental, encouraging vulnerability and empathy. It can involve disagreement. In community dialogues, allies and community members create a non-judgmental space to explore intersectional identities, with a focus on listening and empathy.	Competitive, confrontational, and often adversarial, focusing on winning. During academic debates on trans rights, scholars present evidence-based arguments, often aiming to win the argument on policy impact or philosophical grounds.
Outcome	Share ownership and responsibility for the process and direction, aiming to actively listen and reflect. During diverse workplace learning sessions, facilitators encourage employees to reflect on their experiences with bias and discrimination, sharing ownership of the dialogue to foster empathy and understanding.	Opponents presenting cases to support their stance. During a team's debate about diversity policy, different teams argue opposing sides, aiming to win the arguments.
Participants' role	Deeper understanding, new perspectives, and strengthened relationships. Not necessarily the agreement. A restorative justice circle in a school setting involves students discussing incidents of harm, with the goal of mutual understanding and healing, without aiming for winners or losers.	A declared winner and loser, with clear winners based on argument strength. Often polarized and divided group/community. At a student council debate on disciplinary policies, representatives argue to "win" by convincing peers of their stance, often leaving unresolved tensions.
Focus	Understanding underlying beliefs, emotions, and motivations. In feminist consciousness-raising groups, the focus is on listening to others' experiences of sexism and oppression, fostering a collective understanding and emotional support.	Dissecting arguments and evidence to determine validity. At a debate on gender equality in schools, participants focus on presenting data and evidence to support their views, often at the expense of personal stories or feelings.
Listening style	Deep, active listening to understand others' experiences and viewpoints. Listening to the feelings and needs behind the words. During a youth capacity-building program, facilitators encourage active listening during intercultural dialogue workshops, where young people from diverse backgrounds share their stories about experiences of discrimination or exclusion.	Critical listening to identify flaws and counterarguments. At a debate on youth rights, participants listen critically to each other's arguments, focusing on identifying flaws rather than trying to understand the underlying emotions or experiences.

ASPECT	DIALOGUE	DEBATE
Approach to conflict	Emphasizes collaboration and finding common ground. Conflict is understood as a potential to meet the needs. At a restorative circle in a youth camp, participants work through conflicts by exploring each other's needs and finding common ground, allowing for collaborative problem-solving and relationship-building.	Involves conflict as part of the process; often seeks to "defeat" the opponent. During a youth NGO board debate over program priorities, members argue passionately for their preferred projects, leading to increased tension as each side tries to win.
Power dynamic	Reflects power-with dynamic with a focus on shared responsibility and connection. At a grassroots civil society organization operating in remote areas, dialogue-based meetings emphasize shared leadership. Facilitators ensure that marginalized community members, such as migrants, people with special needs, elderly people have a voice in decision-making, promoting a sense of collective ownership and responsibility.	Reflects power over dynamic with a focus on asserting control and winning. During a debate on community development strategies within a grassroots organization, more outspoken or formally educated participants often dominate the conversation, creating a hierarchical power dynamic where influence is asserted through argument strength.
Attitude	Curiosity and tolerance. During social entrepreneurship training for youth, dialogue circles foster an attitude of openness and curiosity. Participants collaboratively explore innovative ideas and diverse approaches to addressing social challenges, such as sustainability or economic inequality, in a non-judgmental space.	Fear of losing and a judgemental approach. At a debate on funding models at a social entrepreneurship summit, participants take a competitive stance, each trying to prove their funding approach—whether venture capital or impact investment—is superior, resulting in a more judgmental atmosphere focused on winning the argument.

Words Matter

We define discussion as a collaborative conversation where participants exchange ideas to explore a topic, clarify thoughts, and often work toward a shared outcome. Since we've discussed dialogue and debate, it's helpful to note that dialogue is a broader approach to communication, with discussion as one method within it, used frequently in our practice. While we don't aim to be rigid with definitions, it's worth highlighting that discussion is applied as a way to reach our goals, such as when brainstorming creative solutions for community engagement, reviewing project milestones with partners, or setting up new caring circles in the office.

Beyond Skills or The Emergent Role of Educators in a Regenerative Paradigm (6 Challenges)

Bětka Wójcik and Marta Gawinek Dagargulia

For a regenerative world, we also need leadership, which can be embodied in the role of the educator and facilitator. Leadership not as a traditional act of leading, stretching, or leaning on authority, but leadership as the courage to host spaces — circles of connection — that welcome the full spectrum of relational identities people bring to share with us and each other. This kind of leadership nurtures a community of learners where people can find their voice, challenge the status quo, reflect on their own choices and decisions and co-create solutions for the crises we face. This type of leadership is crucial in education for sustainable development and civic education, the fields we are working in, but its impact goes far beyond these areas.

In the passage below, we reflect on the evolving roles of educators and facilitators, providing an overview of what is already on our agenda. At the same time, we complement this agenda with new challenges that prompt us to rethink our roles even more deeply as we face complexity and strive not only for resilience and sustainability but also for regeneration. As we explore these insights, you will be introduced to a new "persona" that reflects this emerging role and challenge in the evolving context.

Hello! I'm an educator. I understand my agency!

What we know

The aim of education and the process of life-long learning is to equip us with knowledge and competences that allow for an active professional, civic and private life. This has always been important; however, now, in a rapidly changing world, we need to promote the competencies needed to thrive and experience a fulfilling life in the midst of the unpredictable and ever changing conditions of a complex world.

These changes are dynamic and we can observe how education and the role of educators is adapting to this new reality, especially in non-formal and alternative educational contexts. Although in formal educational contexts these changes are not so visible, we can observe more openness and courage to try out new things. More and more elements and qualities of facilitators are welcomed in different educational contexts (individual and group learning, among youth and adults). In this reading, we describe the key elements of the facilitator's role that create a basis for education which allows for participation, holistic learning, addressing relevant topics, and unleashing learner´s potential. This approach can support educators in creating the learning spaces in which people can develop key competencies needed for navigating complexity and striving for regeneration.

Challenge 1

Before we dive deeply, let's clarify that we take the word "role" very seriously. In a world of polycrises and constant anxiety, the last thing we need in education are educators who merely carry out their functions and tasks. There is no such thing as a "function" in education, because education is not a set of mechanical processes to be programmed into the minds of young people. Education and learning are dynamic energy flows, a choreography of different qualities. This is why the real work of educators is not just to perform tasks but to continuously define their role — more so, their agency.

Agency aligns our inner "whys," "whats," and "hows" with the shared experiences we create in learning alongside others. We need to talk more about agency because it reflects and unleashes the transformative power we hold as educators. It's not just about fulfilling institutional objectives. It's about responding to an inner calling that guides us daily in our decisions, actions, and relationships with those we lead.

On-the-ground insight

In a session on social justice, the facilitator realizes her role is not just to provide content and format but to model and reflect her own agency. She openly shares her personal motivations and values regarding the topic, demonstrating how her inner "why" aligns with the session's purpose. This transparency encourages participants to do the same, fostering a learning environment where both facilitator and learners connect deeply with the material and take ownership of their own learning journey. By embracing her agency, the facilitator creates a space where authentic, transformative engagement can unfold.

Hello!
I'm a steward for authenticity

What we know

Facilitation focuses on strengthening key competencies that can keep up with society's current needs and complex situations. Here, education shifts from gaining knowledge to acquiring competencies and attitudes that empower individuals and groups to live happy and full lives, including communication skills, empathy, self-awareness, flexibility, teamwork, conflict transformation, a proactive attitude as well as critical thinking.

Key competencies are the sum of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are needed to live in contemporary societies.
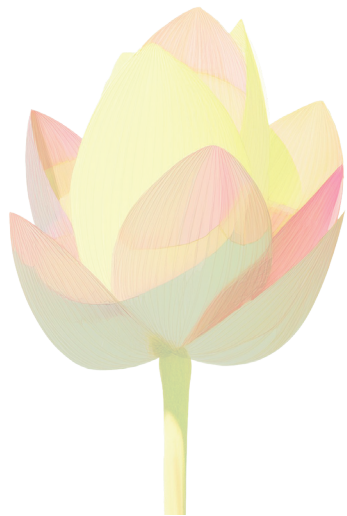
Challenge 2

One of the most important competencies we need to develop is self-awareness: awareness of our own possibilities and limitations, values, resources and beliefs. We can support young people in developing this competency through holding a safe space where important questions can be raised, authentic answers can be expressed and different roles can be taken on. They need us to be projectors of their beliefs and values, and reflectors of their courage to be themselves.

Yet developing competencies might not be enough. Young people also need a strong community to belong to and a quality relationship — with themselves, with others, and with nature.

On-the-ground insight

When we look at young environmental movements, we can clearly see a strong foundation of beliefs, fired-up eyes filled with courage, and an energy determined to create change, working hard with their hands, minds, and hearts. That's why the role of a facilitator or educator is to provide resonating affirmatiovns so that such unique, spontaneous, authentic expressions — combined with action toward larger goals (their calling) — can indeed bring about change. This can help counter injustice and the crises humanity faces today.

Hello!
I'm an energy host and belonging guide

What we know

In a world where access to knowledge is easy and common, it is difficult to maintain the old one-way transfer of knowledge between teacher and student.

Facilitation means creating and holding a space where participants can learn from each other through participatory on an eye-to-eye level. In this type of learning, the life experiences of each participant are valued and there is no strong division between experts providing knowledge and the participants who receive it. They are aligned around a common goal and learn better together through sharing their experiences.

The advantages of this type of learning are the development of learners' collaboration and communication skills, enhancement of confidence and the ability to take control of their own learning. Participants get to know themselves and their backgrounds and they can draw from many sources. There is no domination of one person. Participants are co-responsible for the learning process.

Challenge 3

We can't provide such a space simply by using participatory methods and sitting in the circle. The crucial thing is authenticity and acceptance so young people can feel seen and welcomed as they are. It is about creating the spaces where they can experience a true sense of belonging, without having to conform or hide their authentic selves.

Every intentional practice that acknowledges the diverse and intersectional nature of human beings contributes to the ultimate goal of education, which, through the lenses of intersectionality, identity, and belonging, is to empower individuals to engage critically with the world, to nurture self-awareness, and to build inclusive communities. Education should cultivate agency, empathy, and a commitment toward social justice, becoming a transformative force for personal and collective growth. Thus, the role of the facilitator is to model self-awareness, hold integrity, listen deeply to diverse inputs, and guide the energy in the space ensuring the balance of powers.

On-the-ground insight

The facilitator, as a belonging guide, designs a session on human rights and feminist movements using participatory methods like Open Space. In such a space, participants co-create the agenda, proposing topics based on their personal experiences and interests. This approach encourages ownership and collaboration on subjects that matter to all, while acknowledging differing viewpoints. The facilitator ensures everyone feels welcome and safe, weaving diverse perspectives into a collective dialogue. This helps participants develop a strong sense of belonging while tackling complex issues such as injustice, human rights, and political crises.

Hello!
# I'm a process artist who knows when to step aside

What we know

Instead of pointing out gaps and mistakes, facilitation focuses on what learners know and builds on this while introducing new topics and content. The facilitator's role is about encouraging rather than controlling, focusing on potential and strengths rather than emphasizing deficits. This approach fosters a positive and empowering environment where learners feel supported and encouraged to grow.

On-the-ground insight

As a process artist, the facilitator begins a learning session by creatively gathering what the group already knows about a topic, using visual tools like mind maps or concept boards to organize ideas and knowledge. Participants are given space for individual reflection, assessing their strengths, needs, and personal connections to the subject. They then identify their own learning goals, mapping out how they wish to engage with the material. The facilitator, acting as a process artist, curates this information, highlighting the collective strengths of the group and shaping the session around those assets. By visually and dynamically guiding participants through the learning process, the facilitator creates a living, evolving experience where the group's input becomes the foundation for deeper exploration, fostering engagement and personal ownership of learning.

Challenge 4

While a strength-based approach can empower young people, it can also mislead them. We must also acknowledge limitations and threats honestly and support young people in becoming more aware and able to define them on their own. It is about learning to trust your own instincts, understanding your own limits and boundaries. This requires trust, courage and an ongoing habit of self-reflection. While focusing on potential, educators often need to incorporate the practice of stepping-back, allowing space for something new to emerge and to play its role. There are moments when the educator's most profound contribution is to "do nothing," holding space for self-discovery and growth. In this space, students can engage more deeply with their own strengths and limitations, cultivating courage, self-trust and the capacity to co-create with others. The art of facilitation, then, lies not only in guiding but in knowing when to step aside and let the learning process unfold naturally, allowing learners to navigate their own path toward self-awareness and agency.
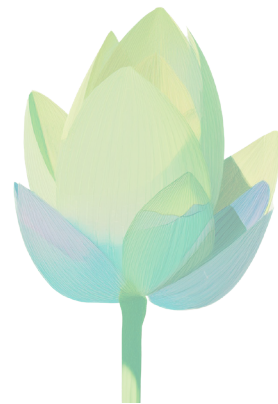
Hello!
I'm an integrator

What we know

Facilitation is about designing learning processes that address the whole personality — on the cognitive, emotional and practical levels. This approach is known as holistic learning. Theoretical knowledge and competencies are best strengthened through practical application and critical reflection on what has been learned, as well as through emotional involvement in the process. Cognitive learning is about facts, theory, and relating them in a logical manner. Emotional learning is about interacting with others, playing, connecting, experiencing different emotions, as well as feeling challenged and curious. Practical learning turns ideas into decisions and actions, practicing skills and experimenting. Holistic learning is based on experiential learning: where new knowledge is developed through experience, reflective observation, and trial and error. The ability to act as autonomous, responsible individuals requires a safe space for active participation. It is also about fostering systems thinking and raising awareness about global interconnections.

On-the-ground insight

As an integrator, the facilitator designs a learning session that connects participants' real-world contexts to the content being explored. For instance, in a session on fact-checking, the facilitator integrates knowledge acquisition (reading articles on media literacy) with practical exercises where participants verify real-world claims they encounter in their own social media feeds or local news outlets. Participants work in groups, using fact-checking tools, and then reflect on the challenges they faced and how misinformation impacts their communities. In this role, the facilitator integrates learning by drawing connections between the participants' lived experiences and the material, helping them see the relevance of fact-checking in their daily lives. Through group reflection, participants explore how misinformation influences their personal networks, deepening their understanding of the broader social implications and opening the space for engagement.

Challenge 5

Seeing learning as a holistic process is crucial, but we must also recognize that learning happens far beyond the facilitated space. The emerging role of the facilitator is to create the space where these experiences can be explored, reflected on and integrated. It starts with the curiosity about what young people do outside the classroom — what music they listen to, how they share their emotional states with friends, what books they read, and which YouTube channels they follow. The role of the educator shifts from creating the learning space that allows for fostering skills to also creating integration strategies, where the knowledge and experiences gained from other spaces or from life itself are brought into the circle. Thus, the facilitator's role is complemented by the role of integrator, ensuring that learning is enriched by the diverse influences and authentic experiences that shape learners' lives.

Hello!
I'm a holder of chaotic freedom

What we know

Participation in learning is sometimes understood as using active and engaging methods, but its meaning is much deeper and wider. It's about ensuring that people have the right, the means, the space, and the support to express their views, and to contribute to and influence the decisions that are made and that affect them.

Facilitators can enhance participation by using methods that encourage disagreements, help participants express their needs, and take responsibility for the decisions being made. However, it's not just about the methods; our attitude is in fact crucial. This involves being authentically curious about each person's perspective, being aware of one's own biases, avoiding judgments, encouraging disagreement, and connecting with empathy by attuning to feelings and needs.

On-the-ground insight

In a rural Eastern European community, a youth facilitator struggled with passive participation, noticing that meetings felt inclusive on the surface but retained a power imbalance. To shift this dynamic, the facilitator took a more experimental approach, intentionally stepping back and creating a space of creative chaos by removing the usual structure. The first sessions were messy, with confusion and competing voices, but soon, an organic form of order emerged as participants began to self-organize, define their own rules, and propose unexpected ideas. This process broke down hidden power dynamics and revealed untapped leadership, transforming the group into a more self-sustaining and empowered one where traditional authority was replaced by collective intelligence and freedom.

Challenge 6

Creating space for participation has always involved a level of uncertainty and a willingness to explore new directions. However, due to the rapid changes and the complexity of our world today, this uncertainty is more pronounced, often leading to a chaotic feeling. This heightened unpredictability challenges facilitators to be even more flexible and to cultivate a sense of safety within themselves to navigate this instability and to avoid controlling the dynamic and imposing participation out of fear of losing control. A relational approach focuses on real participation, ensuring that every voice matters. By taking on a guiding role instead of a controlling one, facilitators can cultivate environments that strike a balance between freedom and structure which is focused on creating meaning and not trying to control it. This encourages creativity, enhances shared ownership, nurtures collective understanding, and supports the transformation of individuals and groups while respecting the essence of shared learning.

Final thoughts

Instead of formulating a conclusion, we did an exercise, which we apply in our practice — persona analysis from design thinking to crystallize an idealistic persona profile of the facilitators of the future, those who will be working navigating rapid changes and complexity within a regenerative paradigm. This profile captures the essence of the key qualities, skills, and approaches that such facilitators may embody. It is important to note that this is not a set of minimum requirements but rather a creative exploration to offer inspiration and orientation.

Inquiry invitation

We invite you to imagine your own profile as a practitioner and facilitator of learning processes that guide us towards regenerative systems — for ourselves, for people, and for the planet. This persona serves as a reflection of the type of leadership and facilitation that the future of regenerative practices might call for, blending empathy, collective leadership skills, trauma-informed and holistic approaches in a world of complexity.v

ASPECT	DETAILS
Name	Mila Nowak
Age	38
Occupation	Regenerative leadership facilitator and educator
Background	Mila has 12+ years of experience working with diverse groups across global contexts. She holds certifications in environmental science, trauma-informed care, Nonviolent Communication (NVC), and systems thinking. Mila's experience living in Romania and various countries gives her a global perspective, enriching her approach to facilitation.
Personality traits	‣ Empathetic: Listens beyond words, values unspoken needs. ‣ Curious: Open to new insights, embraces the unknown. ‣ Authentic and Vulnerable: Comfortable with imperfections and transparency. ‣ Adaptive: Willing to change plans based on group needs. ‣ Resilient: Aware of her own stress and trauma responses and regulation mechanisms.
Goals and motivations	Mila's primary goal is to support the world where diverse needs are seen and taken into consideration. She is driven by a personal mission to restore balance between people and the planet, helping participants realize their own power while understanding their responsibilities to others and the environment.
Challenges	‣ Navigating Power Dynamics: Strives to ensure power is shared in groups and supports the environment where people can contribute despite power differences. ‣ Creating the space in which different emotions are welcome. ‣ Balancing Structure and Flexibility: Constantly reflects on how much structure is necessary versus how much space to leave for group co-creation. ‣ Staying within limits: Awareness of personal limits and boundaries

ASPECT	DETAILS
Work approach	‣ Co-Creation and Participation: Mila uses tools like Systemic Consensing and Convergent Facilitation to ensure collective decision-making. ‣ Creating Safe(r) Spaces: Practices trauma-informed collaboration, emphasizing consent, transparency, and autonomy in activities. ‣ Reflective and Intentional: Uses journaling and the Johari Window for self-reflection.
Tools, methods and approaches	‣ Art of Hosting: Uses participatory leadership and group collaboration practices to empower collective decision-making. ‣ Trauma Stewardship: Applies trauma-informed approaches to support participants' emotional resilience. ‣ Nonviolent Communication: awareness of feelings and needs, fostering empathy, conflict transformation ‣ Participatory Leadership Approaches: Engages participants in collective decision-making. ‣ Systemic Consensing and Convergent Facilitation for decision-making. ‣ Polyvagal Theory and trauma-informed practices for creating safe spaces. ‣ De Bono's Six Thinking Hats, Mind Mapping for multi-perspective problem solving. ‣ Johari Window and 360° feedback for self-reflection and feedback. ‣ Strong Storytelling Skills: Uses storytelling as a key method for conveying complex ideas, creating emotional resonance, and connecting participants with both content and each other. embodied practices to support emotional regulation and strengthen resilience
Reflection and self-awareness	Mila frequently reflects on her practice with questions like: ‣ Am I embodying values which I'm sharing at my work? ‣ How do my identity (race, gender, privilege) and biases affect my facilitation? ‣ Am I empowering participants to be autonomous in their learning process? ‣ How do I navigate difficult situations and challenges? Am I aware of my own limitations and do I use support?
Commitments outside facilitation	Mila is actively engaged in political activism focusing on climate justice, human rights, and equality. Her activism reflects her commitment to broader societal change. However, when facilitating, she remains multipartial, ensuring that her own beliefs and opinions do not influence the process. She creates an open and inclusive environment, allowing diverse perspectives to emerge without imposing her personal views.

Education as Cartography: Mapping The Unknown

We'd love to sit together in a beautiful place with a view and have this conversation with you face-to-face, listening to your thoughts and reflecting on them together. Unfortunately, that's not possible at the moment, but we still want to invite you to join one of our conversations on complexity in the context of education, which we had while sitting together on a sunny summer day in Berlin.

Bětka Wójcik and Julian Czurko

Inquiry invitation

When we view education as a meaningful gathering, the learning process becomes something vibrant and dynamic. As educators, we are not just instructors but guides, gardeners, or, as discussed in the conversation between Bětka and Julian, "cartographers" — mapping a complex, ever-evolving landscape. This approach invites us to see learning as a shared journey, one that makes us feel more alive.

Before you read the script of the conversation, a reflective artifact from practitioners who do their work with heart, please take a moment to think about the questions we provide. It will help you engage more deeply with the ideas presented.

- How does complexity show up in your educational practice?

- How do you create a safe environment for your students?

- Where do you find hope and possibility in embracing complexity?

Julian: So how do you see complexity showing up in educational practice? What does it change?

Bětka: I think what's become really clear now is that simple answers just don't work anymore. The idea of one expert providing universal solutions across various areas is outdated, and complexity proves this, making it increasingly visible. However, schools and traditional education still cling to this model in many cases. It feels so broken that it is no longer possible to pretend it works. The growing recognition and visibility of complexity can bring a positive shift. This change pushes us toward an understanding that reflects reality more accurately. What we need now is to learn how to navigate this new reality.

Julian: When you mention "navigating," I think of a ship's navigator, but maybe a more fitting metaphor for educators today is a "cartographer." A navigator uses a map and knows the waters, implying a complete understanding and a clear direction. But today's world is far more complex, with many voices and perspectives. Educators can no longer offer a single, unified narrative. Young people are navigating shifting realities, and old maps quickly become outdated.
So, perhaps educators are more like cartographers now. Their role is to teach young people how to observe the world, ask good questions, and create their own maps — reflecting individual experiences and changing contexts. It's about understanding how we see things now and the meaning we give them.

Bětka: Exactly. These maps will differ not only from person to person but even from moment to moment. It's about developing the skills to create such maps, and that's something we can teach young people. It's also about fostering self-awareness, so they can navigate their own answers with honesty and authenticity.The educator's role is to provide the knowledge and competencies needed to draw these maps and observe reality thoughtfully, while encouraging students to create their own ones. Another key aspect is acknowledging the "white spots" — areas of uncertainty. Naming these gaps, rather than avoiding them, is crucial. As we explore, shift perspectives, and fill in some white spots, new gaps appear elsewhere. The map is never complete; it's an ongoing process of reflective observation and self-awareness. These maps are ever-changing.

Julian: Yes, mapping is an ongoing process. And I'm also thinking about the skills and competencies young cartographers need. It seems that courage and curiosity are essential here. They need to be brave and curious, willing to question everything, even things that seem obvious or widely accepted.

Bětka: That sounds like the superpower of young people. They already have it! Maybe it is rather the challenge for educators to allow for it.

Julian: Indeed, our role is to model this openness, encouraging them to ask, "Where does this idea come from? Who benefits from it? What are the underlying intentions?" and so on.
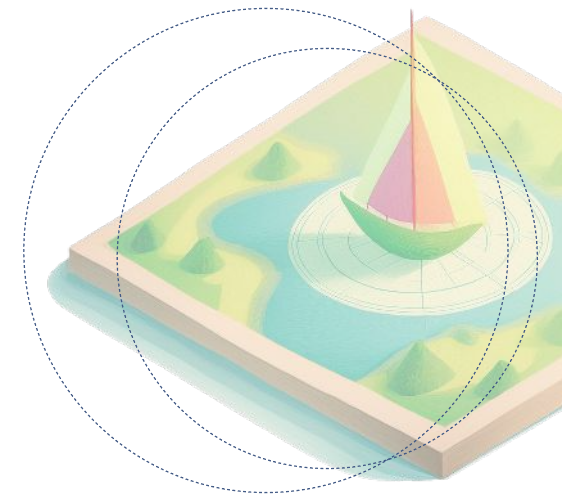
Bětka: Building on our metaphor of sailing, navigators and cartographers — there is also the harbor — a safe space where students can pause, meet, reflect, and prepare for their next journey. It's a moment for them to exchange ideas and ask the tough, brave questions in a safe environment.

Julian: Creating a safe space is one of our key task — a place where young people can ask questions, express doubts, and share feelings, especially when feeling overwhelmed. It's important to remind them that even if something seems to go completely wrong it isn't a failure but a chance to learn or start again. I see learning as a cycle: you develop a new skill, test it in the real world, then return to reflect and integrate the experience. This way, learning becomes embodied, not just intellectual.
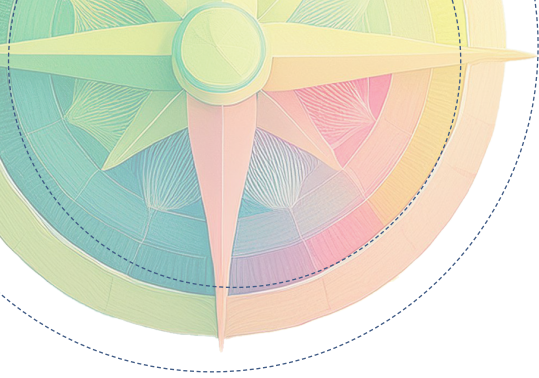
Bětka: Yes, but I want to point out this as well: education isn't just a space to prepare for the future — it's where life is already happening and should be treated as such. We need to stop viewing education only as preparation for future challenges. While learning new skills for the future is important, the present process is equally valuable. This ties to purpose and meaning. If schools focus solely on preparing for what's ahead, we miss something fundamental — it feels like we're postponing life. Complexity isn't something we're preparing for; it's already here, in the classroom, in our discussions. We can reflect on it, name it, and learn from these real situations. Education is about engaging with the present, not just preparing for what's next.

Julian: Yes, I agree, and I believe those experiments should always be part of the educational process. We have the time, space, and tools to reflect on them. They need to be real, not artificial or completely safe —there's always an element of risk involved. But young people can take that risk, knowing they have support. Another crucial aspect is making sure there's a connection between what's happening in school and real life.

Bětka: Our task as educators is to foster as many connections as possible. Ideally, education should naturally become part of life, without needing to invent challenges or tasks. Instead, we should recognize and address what's already present, as daily complexities constantly arise.

Julian: Even in our relatively homogeneous society, there's already so much diversity if we take the time to look closely and listen — if we ask people about their beliefs, opinions, and perspectives. There are so many things to discuss! It's really about engaging with what's alive and present in each specific group and community.

Bětka: What I love about our map metaphor is that even when observing the same thing, we each draw it differently. Everyone has blind spots and unique narratives, perspectives, and experiences. No one shows us exactly what the map should look like, and the goal isn't to replicate the same image. It's about accepting that we may see things differently — sometimes very differently — and not viewing those differences as contradictions.
If someone's map is completely different from mine, I don't need to erase mine or change theirs. Instead, I can get curious, ask questions, and learn. Maybe I'll adjust my map, or maybe I won't, but I'll understand their perspective more.
This helps us move beyond the search for one solution or one narrative. Differences don't need to be simplified or unified.

Julian: When I work with groups, I like to ask, "Who has the same, and who has something different?" This question encourages people to explore both shared experiences and new perspectives, fostering connection and belonging while also embracing discovery and diversity.
For us as educators, it's a lesson in humility and respect — accepting that my map isn't the only one or the "right" one. It simply reflects how I see the world at this moment.

Bětka: This is where education can drive real change. When an educator approaches a student with curiosity and an "I don't know" mindset, it's an act of bravery. It means setting aside what we think we know and asking questions. This openness to complexity brings us closer together and can help dismantle hierarchical structures, replacing them with a new paradigm — one that acknowledges different experiences without ranking them. For example, being older or more educated doesn't automatically mean having more power or rights. Embracing these complexities offers hope and possibilities. While it can be uncomfortable and challenging, it's also an opportunity to re-examine and transform our structures into something more authentic and life-serving.

Julian: Yes, moving toward this in education means adopting a more horizontal approach, with less structure, more openness, partnership, and flexibility.

Bětka: I love our metaphor and where it has led us, but I also have some challenging questions.

Julian: Let's hear them!

Bětka: What we've discussed presents a vision of education that is fully open and free. But one purpose of education is to promote and strengthen certain values. There's a fear that if we let everyone draw their own map, the outcomes might not align with some core values. So what happens then? Is promoting values still a goal of education, or is that changing? And if it is, who sets those values?

Julian: That's a great point. Discussing values — what they mean and why they matter — is crucial in education, but it's not always easy. Many people lack the space or skills to engage in these conversations. In my experience as a trainer, whenever I bring up values in a group, it brings clarity and motivation. A key step forward would be developing educators with the skills to create spaces for these discussions. For example, asking why a topic matters to the group and what values are connected to it.
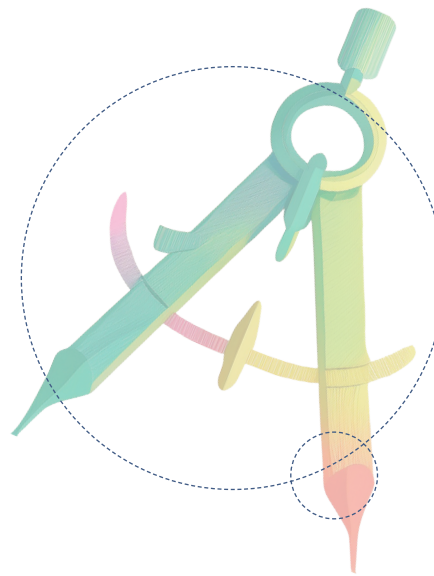
Bětka: In those conversations, people may experience strong, uncomfortable emotions like fear, anxiety, anger, shame, or guilt. While challenging, facing these emotions can create opportunities to transform the entire system.

Julian: I have a personal example. My colleagues and I developed a method for anti-violence education for boys. As male trainers, we realized our "maps" were outdated — we couldn't dictate what masculinity is because young people live in diverse bubbles with different perspectives. Our role was not to show them the map but to create space for exploration, even if we didn't know where it would lead. We start the conversation, open the topic, and then let go of control, accepting that we don't know the outcome.

Bětka: This touches on humility and courage. It's a new space not just for the young people we work with but for us as educators. Developing competencies like self-awareness and self-reflection is crucial, and while these have always been part of education, they are even more important now. In the past, it was easier to avoid discomfort, but in today's complex world, avoidance is quickly noticed. We can no longer rely on avoiding our fears or discomfort.

Julian: It's about rising to the challenge of asking brave questions — ones that challenge the status quo, question what is known, and may feel uncomfortable for everyone involved. Asking these questions in a group helps us move beyond our individual perspective and share it with others. It allows us to bring our personal maps into a shared space, realizing that while our perspective is important, it's just one part of reality. Another part is being together, understanding our interconnectedness, and accepting that being confronted with others is part of life.

Bětka: And again, this reminds us that this is a process of transformation and deep changes. It is not on the surface, it is not just changing one option with another — it is touching the deep roots and transforming the beliefs, it is creating the new paradigms. We are stepping into the unknown, both as individuals and as educators. It can be scary but it is also exciting and hopeful, isn't it?

Final thoughts

Crossing unknown seas brings dilemmas, challenging choices, and situations that often require balancing between polarities. To deepen your reflection on the ideas we discussed, we are offering a list of 9 dilemmas which you might encounter on your journey. These are not problems to be solved, nor are they about right or wrong sides, or good versus bad choices. Rather, they present opportunities for reflection, inviting you to consider the consequences of leaning more toward one side or the other. Each of these choices can bring different costs, possibilities, and limitations. After you explore our examples, perhaps you could add your own dilemma that you are noticing in your educational practice?

Proactive
Foreseeing and assuming what is needed and preparing the process based on this diagnosis

Responsive
Observing emerging needs and possibilities and reacting based on them

Following
Creating a flexible environment where students and educators explore new ideas

Controlling
Maintaining order, structure, and clear outcomes in learning processes

Curiosity
Encouraging questions, exploration, and wonder, embracing the unknown

Certainty
Providing clear answers, guidance and fixed knowledge

Support
Focusing on providing support and creating a nurturing space for growth

Challenge
Creating challenges, encouraging students to step out of their comfort zones, take risks, and face discomfort

Reflection
Pausing to consider, evaluate, and deepen understanding through self-awareness

Action
Engaging in hands-on learning, experimenting, and applying knowledge in real-time

Individualism
Focusing on individual perspective, honoring each student's personal journey and voice

Collaboration
Fostering community, focusing on teamwork, and shared understanding in learning

Freedom
Allowing flexibility, choice, and autonomy in how learning unfolds

Structure
Implementing clear frameworks, goals, and guidelines to ensure progress

Guidance
Providing mentorship, direction, and expertise

Autonomy
Empowering students to take ownership of their learning and make independent decisions

Future oriented
Focusing on skills and knowledge for anticipated challenges and careers

Present oriented
Focusing on answering current needs and following what is alive here and now

Safe. Safer. Being Brave

Bětka Wójcik and Marta Gawinek Dagargulia

In recent years, the theory of "safe spaces"[9] has become central in fostering open, respectful, and inclusive dialogue in educational and community settings. This concept, aiming to allow individuals to express themselves without fear of judgment, have evolved into the ideas of "safer"[10] or "brave spaces"[11], which acknowledge that growth often requires discomfort and vulnerability — especially when addressing complex topics like identity, trauma, and power. By creating supportive environments, these spaces enable deeper engagement, authentic connections and collective healing. In the article below, Marta Gawinek Dagargulia and Bětka Wójcik explore how such spaces can foster regeneration and transformation.

Connecting this concept to the broader ideas of regenerative practices such as dialogue, we see that the process of creating safer and brave spaces mirrors the principles of holistic recovery and transformation. Regenerative practices focus on restoring well-being, fostering resilience, and promoting renewal — not just on an individual level, but within communities and ecosystems. In the same way, regenerative dialogue encourages conversations that heal, repair, and rebuild connections, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. As we increasingly focus on trauma-informed approaches and emphasize the importance of healing, these discussions are shifting the way we talk about learning, dialogue and inclusivity, both in practice and language.

The constructivist idea that "words create worlds"[12] highlights the power of language in shaping our realities. By normalizing conversations about healing and regeneration, we not only acknowledge the impact of trauma but actively create spaces where recovery and growth are possible. In this overview of safer and brave spaces, we invite you to explore how these concepts serve as mediums for healing and regeneration, providing fertile ground for individual and collective transformation.
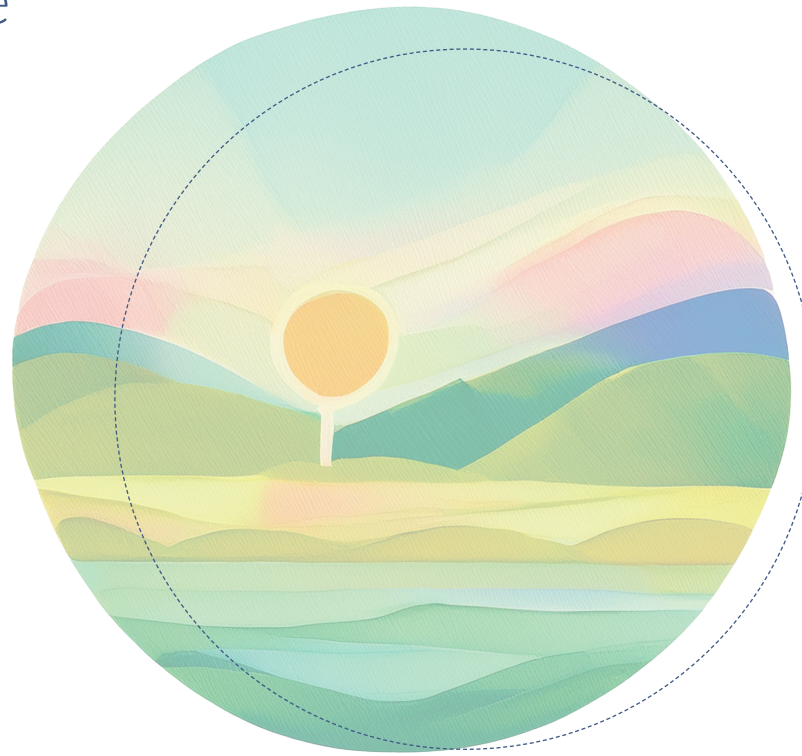
Safe spaces: shelters for growth or comfort zones

The "safe space" concept outlines principles of interaction that aim to contribute to creating a safe environment for group work or learning processes. Safe space is emphasized as being a main precondition for exploring diversity in the group and participating in dialogue.

In essence, a safe space is defined as a place where people can express their views openly, even if they differ from the others in the group. A space becomes safe, when participants are not afraid of being vulnerable and when individual differences and vulnerabilities are seen as gifts and learning opportunities.

As the concept of safe spaces gains popularity in educational context, it is often very much simplified. At first glance it seems that safe space can be easily established by introducing some rules of cooperation and respecting general principles. While rules and principles can be a part of creating a safe space, they alone are not enough. Both the facilitator and participants need to develop a certain attitude and share the ownership for the process and principles.

For example the principle of a freedom to disagree, discretion, and voluntary participation has to be supported with the attitude of acknowledging the diversity of learning patterns, experiences, and backgrounds within the group.

On-the-ground insight

In a workshop, the facilitator, following the rule of a "safe space," asks participants to place their hands on each other's shoulders in a group exercise. While the activity is meant to build trust, some individuals, uncomfortable with physical touch, feel pressured to conform. Although labeled as a "safe space," this scenario shows that simply having rules isn't enough. True safety requires acknowledging personal boundaries and allowing for opt-outs without pressure, emphasizing that comfort levels differ, especially with touch.
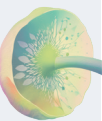
[9]Kenney, Moira. Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.
[10]The Audre Lorde Project. "Safer Space Policy" (2009).
[11]The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators, edited by Lisa M. Landreman, Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2013.
[12]Phillips, D. C. (2014). Constructivism in education: Theories and applications. Routledge.

Beyond safe spaces: toward safer and braver conversations

Together we will create a brave space
Because there is no such thing as a "safe space"
We exist in the real world
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
In this space
We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world.
We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
We call each other to more truth and love
We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
We will not be perfect.
It will not always be what we wish it to be
But It will be our brave space together,
And
We will work on it side by side.[13]

The concept of safe(r) space or brave space has come as a response to the limitations of the traditional "safe space" concept, especially in situations involving sensitive, complex or controversial topics.
While safe spaces aim to provide a non-threatening environment, prevent discrimination and harm, brave spaces recognize that in reality true engagement with challenging topics requires a certain degree of discomfort, risk-taking and dealing with uncertainty. While we acknowledge that a completely non-threatening space isn't possible, we are committed to learning and making efforts towards a safer environment.

In a brave space we encourage people to engage courageous conversations with honesty, open heart and vulnerability. We are not avoiding challenging topics or conflicts but we aim to see in them a potential and transform them through dialogue. We see dialogue as a powerful example of a brave space, where we can share our experiences and thoughts with openness and vulnerability and where we can receive other people with empathy.

Brave spaces also prioritize safety but it's not about avoiding discomfort, it's rather ensuring that the space is respectful and supportive enough to handle discomfort with care.

Brave spaces also highlight the importance of self-care and community care. Participants are encouraged to be aware of their own limits and boundaries, to communicate their needs and requests and to reach for support if needed. The group is encouraged to look out for one another to strengthen collective responsibility and co-create a supportive and caring environment.

Brave spaces can lead to deeper, more meaningful conversations, stronger, more resilient communities and closer, more authentic connections between people.

On-the-ground insight

Based on our experience, we recommend the following strategies to incorporate the safer space principle into group settings. These are drawn from our practice facilitating diverse groups, with a short example for context:

1. Establish ground rules: The facilitator introduces the concept of a brave space, explaining that discomfort is a natural part of discussing intersectional topics (e.g., race, gender, class). Ground rules like active listening and respectful disagreement are established to ensure a supportive environment. Participants are involved in the co-creation of these ground rules to enhance shared ownership and responsibility.

2. Facilitate brave dialogue: Participants are invited to share personal experiences of privilege and marginalization (e.g., a queer person of color discussing workplace challenges). The facilitator reminds the group that discomfort is part of growth, encourages open, honest sharing and supports the group in naming feelings and needs behind the words and opinions.

3. Promote self-care and care: Facilitator encourages participants not only to share openly but also to be aware of their own boundaries and limits. This practice is very important as we are used to over-cross our boundaries way too often which can cause re-traumatization. The group is encouraged to practice self-care and support each other to prevent feelings of isolation in vulnerability.

Example: In a workshop on racial and gender privilege for community leaders in Hungary, a brave space allowed participants to explore how their identities intersect. A woman with a refugee background shared how being both a racial minority and a woman shaped her career in tech. Without this brave space, the discomfort of addressing race and gender in the workplace could have suppressed this important dialogue.

Trauma sensitive space: host yourself then steward

In addition to a brave space we see the importance of creating trauma sensitive or trauma informed learning spaces. What does it mean? Trauma-sensitive approach acknowledges that individuals may have experienced various forms of trauma or experience stress and trauma responses that can influence their participation and well-being in learning environments. Moreover, the importance of trauma-sensitive spaces is amplified when addressing complex and challenging topics, such as the reality of polycrisis during collectively stressful times.

In Trauma Stewardship Laura van Dernoot Lipsky[14] calls for cultivating awareness and compassion, not only for those we support but also for ourselves as facilitators and caregivers. Lipsky highlights the importance of recognizing the personal toll that comes with holding space for others' traumas, advocating for self-care, mindfulness, and sustainable practices to prevent burnout.

Stress and trauma responses can affect how we interact, learn, and process information. This approach involves more than just creating a safe space — it requires understanding and addressing the complex impacts of trauma, raising awareness of stress and trauma responses, modeling care and resilience, and creating support systems. For facilitators, it means raising awareness of their own triggers, stress and trauma responses and learning how to hold space in environments that may not feel safe for everyone."

[13]Jones, Micky ScottBey. (2017). An Invitation to a Brave Space. https://www.mickyscottbeyjones.com/

[14]Lipsky, L. v. D., & Burk, C. (2009). Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

7 Principles of a trauma-sensitive space

When designing facilitated spaces, we gently approach them with curiosity, inviting reflection on how we can create environments that feel safe, inclusive, and supportive.These key principles offer a guiding framework to help us co-create spaces that honor both individual and collective needs.

1. Clarity and transparency
   Establish clear guidelines and provide transparency about goals and processes. Participants should always understand what to expect, allowing them to make informed choices about their level of engagement.

2. Stress and trauma awareness[15]
   Raise your sensitivity to potential triggers, learn to recognize stress and trauma responses in oneself and others.

3. Choice and consent
   Empower participants by offering choices and control over their level of participation. This encourages a sense of safety and personal agency in the environment.

4. Care and support system
   Guide participants on how and where they can seek support if needed. Aim for creating support systems for both participants and educators.

5. Self-care and well-being
   Highlight the importance of self-care, physical, and psychological well-being. This applies to both participants and facilitators, fostering resilience and reducing burnout.

6. Awareness of power and privilege
   Recognize how power dynamics and privilege influence interactions and experiences within the learning environment. This awareness helps prevent unintentional systemic inequalities and re-traumatization.

7. Somatic awareness and embodiment
   Attune to the physical and emotional experiences of the body. Encourage somatic awareness to help participants regulate and stay grounded.

[15]Understanding stress and trauma responses to strengthen resilience in uncertain times by Christa Cocciole and Bětka Wójcik

On-the-ground insight

The following strategies underline the practical application of safer and brave space principles in various settings:

Consent about participation in exercises and activities
Give clear instructions and ask for consent before any exercise or activity. This is especially important for activities involving touch or vulnerable personal experiences. Inform participants beforehand about each step of the process so they can make conscious decisions about their level of participation. Remind them that it's okay to step away if they feel uncomfortable. Creating a safer space is not only about accepting "no" but also about actively inviting "no" to empower individuals to set boundaries. Think about offering different levels of participation to accommodate diverse comfort zones.

Consent and principles for group meetings
At the start of every meeting, workshop, or event, establish a set of principles that support the group's process and ensure safety. While you, as a facilitator, can suggest initial principles, involving participants in defining or refining these guidelines helps build ownership and shared understanding. This collaborative approach enhances the group's sense of belonging. It's also important to clarify abstract terms like "respect" by asking participants what it looks like in practice. For example, how would they recognize that respect is present during the meeting?
When organizing a larger event, consider creating a safer space policy and sending it to participants in advance. This policy should outline the purpose of the event, guiding values, unacceptable behaviors, procedures for addressing misconduct, and information on where to seek support if needed.

Safer space guidelines in organizations
A written security policy supports ensuring safety across an organization over the long term. This policy should define core values and principles guiding the organization's interactions with target groups, acceptable behaviors, processes for reporting and addressing issues, and a clear framework for managing conflicts. In some countries, such policies are legally required, especially if the organization works with vulnerable groups such as children and youth.

Inquiry invitation

- How do you already create a safer and brave space at your work with groups? What new practice do you want to try out?

- What supports you personally in entering the brave space and embracing vulnerability?

- What triggers do you recognize in your working environment?

- When triggered, what supports you to regulate and re-establish safety? What supports you while working with the groups? List your strategies to use them when needed.

Final thoughts

In conclusion, the shift from "safe" to "safer" and "brave" spaces reflects a deeper understanding of the complexity of dialogue and social healing. Regenerative practices, like these evolving spaces, prioritize holistic recovery, resilience, and transformation. By fostering environments where discomfort is embraced as part of growth and vulnerability is honored, we enable meaningful conversations and collective healing. This regenerative approach, grounded in empathy and co-creation, strengthens communities, allowing us to rebuild connections and cultivate lasting change. Safe. Safer. Being brave. Each step is essential in the journey toward transformation.
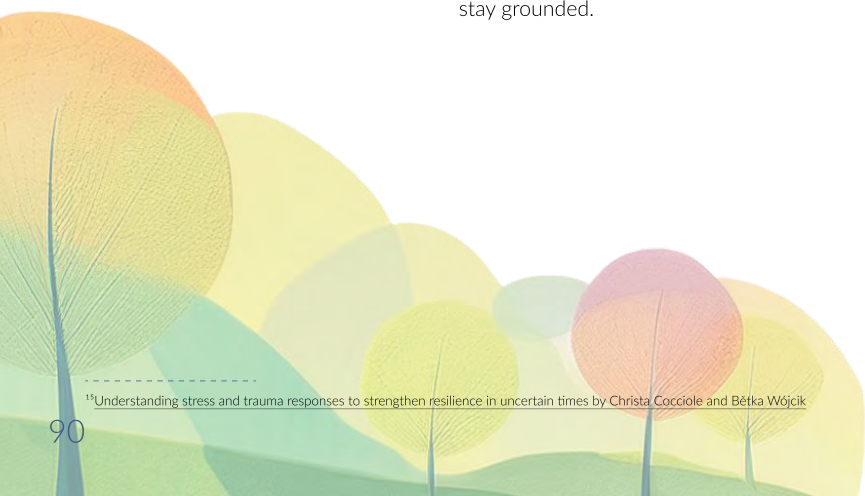
The Body Remembers.
The Body Calls for Attention

Maksim Smekhov

Before working on this text, I recently experienced a very vulnerable moment in my life. I brought to Berlin a very compelling theater play that uncovers the hidden truths behind the facade of normality. Organizing the performance of this play, I was internally manifesting: "the world is facing tough times, and things might get even harder. But before we can face what's coming, we need to be honest about where we are".

In my post on Instagram, I wrote: "My body starts shaking from the first line of the script. I feel dizzy, I cannot breathe, my heartbeat quickens, and my mind becomes foggy. It's worse than horror because it is a direct confrontation with reality. It feels so distant from me, yet it's so much about others. But deep down, it's unfortunately also about me." This was not only a verbalization of what I felt and experienced; it was a deep embodiment of everything that was happening. This play, even though I did not appear in the performance, was the strongest exposition of myself. I organized the show with the deepest presence of my body, soul, and heart because I needed that to start healing the deep social trauma and such healing is possible only with and within a community. That was not comfortable, yet I was telling myself "your body knows, your body knows…"

As we write this handbook on regenerative practice and dialogue, particularly in the context of trauma-informed work, self-awareness, and embodiment, the Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to South Korean author Han Kang for "her intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas." This recognition highlights the deep resonance of collective and individual trauma, and it reminds us of the delicate balance between pain, healing, and growth in the process of becoming whole. Her writing, especially in books like The Vegetarian and Human Acts, confronts the physical and psychological scars of trauma. "I didn't want to remember," she writes, "but the memories insisted on finding their own form." These words echo the experiences we often encounter in trauma-informed work. The stories that live in the body — whether individual or collective — often refuse to stay buried. The body remembers. The body calls for attention. This call, sometimes loud, sometimes soft, is where regeneration begins.

In the spirit of Han Kang's poetic awareness of trauma and memory, we too must embrace the importance of slowing down, of pausing to breathe deeply, and of listening to what emerges when we do so. As care practitioners, we are asked to develop the sensitivity to perceive not just the pain of the world but also its underlying vibrancy. This work invites us to meet ourselves over and over again — so that we could better meet the world. In Han Kang's prose, there is a recognition of the painful paradox of healing: that sometimes to heal, we must first confront and even embody the very things we fear. "Is it possible to truly feel this pain?" Her inquiry points to a vital question in trauma-informed work: How do we hold space for the suffering — ours and others'? How do we stay present, embodied, and aware of it all?

This is where embodiment and self-awareness intersect in powerful ways. Christa Cocciole, in the next section, will offer a practical overview of somatic practices that ground us in the present moment, allowing us to fully inhabit our bodies, even in the midst of discomfort. These somatic approaches are not just tools for personal wellness — they are pathways to understanding and engaging with the world around us in a more holistic, grounded way. They emphasize the wisdom of the body and the importance of reconnecting with our sensory experiences, especially when navigating complexity, trauma and social healing.

The Power of Somatics and Embodiment in Education: Addressing Dilemmas Holistically

Christa Cocciole

In today's fast-paced and complex world, the need for holistic approaches in education has never been more pressing. Traditional methods often focus heavily on cognitive learning, sidelining the crucial role that the body plays in understanding the world and decision-making. This is where somatics and embodiment come into play, offering profound ways to enhance personal and collective well-being and expanding our ability to navigate complexity. Understanding and integrating these practices can transform how we address the myriad challenges of the polycrisis. This is done by fostering environments where students and educators alike can thrive by enhancing personal resilience and collective learning experiences. In order to do this, we need to integrate the soma or the "Body-Mind" beyond "icebreakers" in learning settings.

Embodiment and somatic wisdom

Embodiment refers to the experience of living in and through the body. It involves being fully aware of bodily sensations, emotions, and movements, and recognizing the body as a central aspect of identity and experience. Embodiment can be strengthened by regular mindful movement practices, such as: yoga, dance, sports.

"Somatics" is a field of study and individual and collective practices that emphasizes the body as a source of knowledge and wisdom. It encompasses regenerative resilience-based* techniques and approaches that enhance bodily awareness and movement, integrating physical sensations with cognitive processes to foster a holistic understanding of oneself and the systems one is embedded in. It helps us change embodiment or "shape" from reaction to responsiveness in order to expand one's choices in how one relates to the world.

*Regenerative resilience is the ever increasing capacity to recenter or "ground" and be restored, in order to be more flexible, learn from and adapt when challenges or complexities arise.
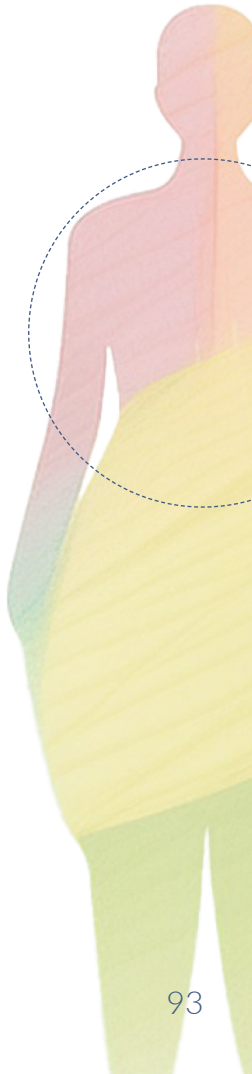
Harnessing somatics to navigate complex dilemmas

Enhanced awareness and insight: One of the core principles of somatics is the belief that the body holds valuable information. Often signals from the body are quickly interpreted as something to fix or avoid. This reaction often overrides the information the soma is trying to tell us. For example: bodily or emotional pain, tells us that something is "wrong" or may be hurting us. A sense of curiosity implies that we are safe enough to learn and grow. (Fun fact: curiosity and distress can not be experienced simultaneously in the body). By tuning into bodily sensations and signals with curiosity, individuals can gain insights that are not always accessible through cognitive processes alone. This mind-body integration allows for a fuller understanding of experiences, leading to more comprehensive solutions to dilemmas and complexities. When sensation and thought are equally engaged, decisions are more likely to be aligned with one's true needs and values as well as experiencing possibilities and understanding at a deeper level.

Presence and connection: Embodiment encourages present-moment awareness, which is crucial for addressing dilemmas effectively. It helps individuals stay grounded and focused, rather than being overwhelmed by past experiences or future anxieties. Moreover, somatic practices foster authentic connections with others, enhancing communication and collaboration. This makes it easier to navigate complex issues collectively and creatively, as individuals are able to be more in tune with themselves and those around them.

Resilience and adaptability: Embodiment practices teach individuals to become more comfortable with discomfort and uncertainty. This resilience is essential when facing ever increasing complexities of our time, as it allows for staying present and engaged even in challenging situations. By listening to and interpreting bodily signals, individuals can develop more adaptive responses to what is needed in the moment. This leads to actions that are not only more effective but also more sustainable and aligned with one's well-being.

Safety and co-regulation: Somatics highlights the importance of co-regulation, where individuals synchronize their nervous systems to create a sense of safety and connection.
Co-regulation happens when any mammal is dysregulated, for example from (dis)stress and/or anxiety, and through connecting with another mammal that is calm, a positive feedback loop of self-regulation can be set in motion. Being in Nature has also been proven to be effective in regulating the nervous system. In fact some studies say that looking at something green can calm the nervous system!
This is particularly useful in dilemma situations where anxiety and stress levels can be high. When individuals feel safe, they are more open to exploring new perspectives and solutions. Somatic practices help create environments where safety and trust are prioritized, facilitating more effective and creative problem-solving skills.

Bringing somatics into education: practical pathways for integration

1. Acknowledge bodily signals: Often dilemmas are first sensed in the body and immediately read as something "wrong" or "off", thus educators and students should be encouraged to pay attention to the layers of what their bodies are telling them. Even though this may feel awkward or new to some people — especially youth — noticing feelings of tension, relaxation, or any other sensations without judgment can be the first step towards deeper self-awareness and understanding. This information, when guided at a pace that the group can feel comfortable enough with, can inform the process as well as support a safe(r) environment for the group. This can be encouraged, for example, with a short "check-in" at the beginning of a process, class or discussion. Questions such as "How are you arriving in this meeting today" can encourage acknowledging and communicating inner states of being.

2. Friendly curiosity: Approach bodily sensations with a friendly and curious mindset. Instead of reacting immediately towards a perceivable contradiction or dilemma, explore what signals your body might be communicating. This can lead to more thoughtful and deliberate actions to the situation. An initial discomfort might just be letting us know something is new. Which in turn could offer wisdom that hasn't yet been conscious. A Body Scan meditation can support strengthening this skill.

3. Awareness of inner and outer resources, capacities and competence to reach for them when needed: Decide whether to focus inward on personal sensations or outward on the surrounding environment. Sometimes, turning inward helps in self-regulation, while at other times, connecting with a safe person or environment can provide needed regulation. These two foci are nested in a relationship, and constantly inform each other. Once awareness is raised of the impact that one has on the other, there can be more freedom in the choices one has in responding to complexities.

4. Strengthen connections: When a connection feels safe, engage with it. This could be a person, an animal, or something comforting in nature. Such connections can promote a sense of belonging and safety, which are crucial for effective self-regulation.

Unfolding the benefits of somatic practices in learning

Creating supportive learning environments:
By incorporating somatic practices, educators can create learning spaces that are more attuned to the needs of students. This can enhance learning by making students feel more supported and understood. For example, starting a class with a brief body scan or mindfulness exercise can help students transition into a learning mindset more effectively.

Developing emotional intelligence: Students who practice embodiment and somatics can develop greater emotional intelligence. They become more adept at recognizing and understanding their own emotions and those of others. This skill is invaluable for navigating interpersonal relationships and conflicts, both in and out of the classroom.

Improved focus and presence: Being in the moment helps with concentration and engagement, leading to better learning outcomes. When students are fully present, they are more likely to absorb information and participate actively in class activities.

Enhanced problem-solving: Embodied awareness can lead to more creative and effective problem-solving. By accessing the body's wisdom, students and educators can think outside the box and develop innovative solutions to challenges.

Final thoughts

Integrating somatic perspective and embodied practices into educational settings offers a powerful way to address emergent ways of learning. As we navigate an increasingly complex world, the wisdom of the body can guide us towards more aligned and effective actions, transforming education into a more inclusive and dynamic process. Embracing embodiment and somatics is not just an addition to education — it is a fundamental shift towards a more integrated and holistic approach to learning and living. It supports a curious, open and empathetic approach to ourselves and others especially when we are faced with dilemmas. This view can inform a shift from former power-over dynamics (mind over body, teacher over student, my opinion over yours, etc) into creating a more equitable and integrative future while recognizing our diversities in human connection within our relations.

Inquiry invitation

- What is your relationship to your body at this moment? Is it compassionate and caring or rather demanding and cruel?

- Does your relationship reflect the same intention as to how you treat others? When is a time that you might have embodied a colonized relationship to your own body? (for example, when resting can only happen after "accomplishing" something).

- What kind thing could you do at this moment to nourish your body? Maybe stretch, look away from your screen, take a break?

A checklist to reflect on where you stand in your work and practice. Do you...?

- **Notice bodily signals:** Encourage participants to notice how their body feels at the start of a session (e.g., tense, relaxed).

- **Stay curious about feelings:** Promote curiosity about bodily sensations without judging or reacting to them right away.

- **Balance inner and outer focus:** Help participants decide when to focus on themselves or connect with others for support.

- **Build safe connections:** Support a sense of safety by encouraging connections with trusted people or comforting spaces.

- **Use simple somatic exercises:** Start sessions with short body scans, breathing exercises, or mindful movement.

- **Encourage emotional awareness:** Help participants recognize and express their emotions through body awareness.

- **Practice resilience:** Teach participants to stay present in challenging situations through breathing or grounding exercises.

- **Create safety:** Build trust in the group to help participants feel safe and regulated. Reflect on body care: Ask participants to reflect on how they treat their bodies and encourage small acts of self-care.

- **Incorporate movement:** Add simple stretches or movement breaks to keep participants engaged and aware of their bodies.

- **Stay present:** Encourage participants to stay focused on the present moment for better learning and engagement.

- **Encourage creative thinking:** Use body awareness to explore new ideas and solutions during problem-solving activities.

Have you tried this simple but very efficient exercise Boxed Breathing, which can be helpful to self-regulate and calm the nervous system or 5-4-3-2-1 Awareness Exercise can ground and establish safety with attention to inner and outer resources.

Regulate. Reconnect. Reflect

Bětka Wójcik

We believe that being aware of our own thoughts and reactions has a big impact on how we work with others, lead groups, and manage group activities. Our thoughts shape how we listen, respond, choose methods, and guide the process. Understanding our own needs and reactions also helps us to be aware of our boundaries and improve our well-being at work. Therefore, self-awareness is one of the key competencies of a facilitator, especially when dealing with complex issues and facilitating dialogue on challenging topics.

By practicing self-reflection, we aim to bring more awareness to our work. This set of cards "Regulate, Reconnect, Reflect" describes practices we use in our everyday work which we hope will inspire you and be helpful for your own educational practice!

Along with the exercises, we offer you the wisdom of various ancient and indigenous proverbs, as we believe that part of our regenerative work is to honor the seeds planted by our ancestors. In recent years, systems thinkers have increasingly looked to integrate indigenous wisdom into their approaches, recognizing the profound insights these traditions offer in terms of holistic and sustainable living. Many have even developed courses to incorporate ancient practices, believing that this knowledge should be an essential part of modern system interventions, guiding us toward more balanced and interconnected solutions.

Regulate, reconnect, reflect — so simple, yet so profound. These three simple words are guideposts to access a path of deeper awareness.

So simple, yet so profound. These three simple words are guideposts to access a path of deeper awareness.

Regulate — Especially at moments of intense emotion or when triggered, take a pause first. Give yourself the space to regulate yourself through simple embodied practices.

Reconnect — Turn inward and reconnect with your feelings and needs. What are you experiencing at this moment? What is missing? What are these emotions guiding you toward? Also, reconnect with others — consider what might be behind their words and actions, seeking understanding before responding.

Reflect — Pause to reconsider the path you've taken and what the outcomes of your actions have been. Look closely at how your decisions have affected not only yourself but also those around you. Reflection brings awareness, which paves the way for meaningful growth.

These words are easy to remember, but difficult to master. Yet, by holding them close, we can grow as individuals, cultivate mindful communities, and become facilitators of positive change — both for ourselves and for others.

Regulate
Reconnect
Reflect

Grounding (Sitting)

Use grounding to establish a sense of safety.

Exercise: Stand with your knees slightly bent, or sit comfortably with your feet flat on the ground. Feel the pressure of your feet pressing onto the floor and the steady support beneath you. Take a few deep breaths and notice how your body feels.

Ground yourself to the earth,
for it will heal your soul.

Finn-Ugric Proverb

Regulate
Reconnect
Reflect

Before The Workshop

Set an intentional mindset before facilitating.

Exercise: Before your next meeting, reflect on:

- What is your main motivation for leading this session?
- What do you hope to learn from this experience?

Before every journey,
know the steps you wish to take.

Ancient Slavic Wisdom

Five Senses Practice

Use sensory awareness to stay present.

Exercise: Notice your environment by identifying: 5 things you see, 4 sounds you hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 smells you detect, 1 taste you sense.

When we notice,
we learn to see the unseen.

Ancient Bask Wisdom

Conscious Breathing

Practice conscious breathing to center yourself during tense moments.

Exercise: Take a few deep breaths and observe how the air flows through your body. Imagine how tension is released with each exhalation.

The breath is the bridge which
connects life to consciousness.

Finnish Proverb

After The Workshop

Take time to reflect after facilitating a session.

Exercise: After your next workshop, ask yourself:

- What are you celebrating?
- What went well?
- What would you have done differently?
- What can you leave out next time?

Every experience brings wisdom
for tomorrow.

Slavic Proverb

Journaling

Reflect on your own attitude and reactions as a facilitator.

Exercise: Journal about how your opinions, thoughts and biases can influence your actions during group work. Ask yourself:

- Which of my biases might affect my interactions with participants and my work?
- How do my thoughts shape the way I choose to listen and respond?
- How do I guide a process based on my beliefs and opinions?
- What do I want to be more aware of?

He who knows others is wise;
he who knows himself is enlightened.

Slavic Proverb

Regulate
Reconnect
Reflect

Self-Empathy

Connect to your feelings and needs to foster clarity and understanding without self-judgment.

NOTE: In the Toolkit which is part of this Handbook you will find NVC lists of feelings and needs. Use them to do this practice.

A wise man does not let his heart suffer by dwelling on it.

Ancient Bask Wisdom

Exercise:

1. Recall a concrete situation in which you experienced some discomfort or lack of clarity.
2. Observations: Describe the situation as seen through a camera lens, note exactly what happened and what was said, separating facts from interpretations.
3. Feelings: How do you feel? What are your body sensations? What are your feelings?
4. Needs: Connect your feelings with underlying needs. What was met or unmet in that situation?
5. Request: Consider what action you can take to address your needs and formulate a specific, positive request for yourself or someone else.
6. Check-in: Take a moment to observe how you feel now.

Transformation of Beliefs

Examine unsupportive beliefs that affect your work.

NOTE: In the Toolkit which is part of this Handbook you will find NVC lists of feelings and needs. Use them to do this practice.

Change your thoughts and you change your world.
Slavic Saying

Exercise:

1. Identify an unsupportive belief that influences you and your attitude at work. How exactly does it sound?
2. What meaning is behind it? How does it impact your work?
3. This belief helped you to meet some needs. Try to identify what was behind it? What needs were you trying to meet through this belief?

Empathy for Others

Practice empathy for another person during conflict and moments of strong judgment.

NOTE: In the Toolkit which is part of this Handbook you will find NVC lists of feelings and needs. Use them to do this practice.

We are all branches of the same tree.
Finnish Saying

Exercise:

Think about a recent conflict or tense moment with another person.

1. Recall the concrete situation.
2. Guess the feelings: Try to identify the emotions that the other person might be experiencing in that situation.
3. Guess the needs: Consider what needs might be behind those feelings. What was important to them, and what needs were they trying to address?
4. Check in with yourself: Take a few deep breaths and notice how you feel now.

Final Thoughts: 10 Episodes to Recap or Get Curious

Whether you've read through the entire piece or are just skimming, this "not-a-conclusion" invites you to explore episodes that reflect different aspects of our collective journey. Imagine a walking journey: each step brings you to an episode where a new perspective or idea unfolds. With each visit to an episode, you return to moments of reflection, uncovering new insights as you revisit and deepen your understanding along the way.

## Episode 1: Integrating sustainability and regeneration

It has been a journey, not just in exploring the concepts of sustainability and regeneration, but in embodying them through the work we've done together in this space. From the very beginning, our collective reflection illuminated a critical insight: while sustainability focuses on balancing needs, minimizing harm, and maintaining current systems, regenerative practices offer a new layer of consideration. They invite us to go beyond sustaining, toward restoring and renewing our connection with each other and the Planet. The regenerative approach provided us with a fresh framework to explore our practice, enriching our understanding and shaping how we map out the potential of dialogue in learning and facilitation. Together, sustainability and regeneration form a holistic approach that can more fully address the complex challenges of our time, such as climate crises, conflict, and social division, while guiding us towards sustainable development.

Episode 2: Inner transformation

We've seen that transformation is not an external process imposed from the outside, but something that emerges from within. Regenerative change asks us to go deeper — to restore, rebuild, and reconnect — not only with the environment but with our communities and ourselves. In this publication, we have explored regenerative practices as they apply to education, facilitation, conflict resolution, and community building, always grounded in the belief that true change must grow from honest conversations and relational work.

Episode 3: Relational identity

Our discussions on relational identity — that our sense of self is shaped by our connections with others — have shown that regeneration begins with understanding the web of relationships we inhabit. It is about acknowledging how deeply interconnected we are, and from this perspective, the work of regeneration means restoring those relationships, whether they are with nature, our communities, or within ourselves.
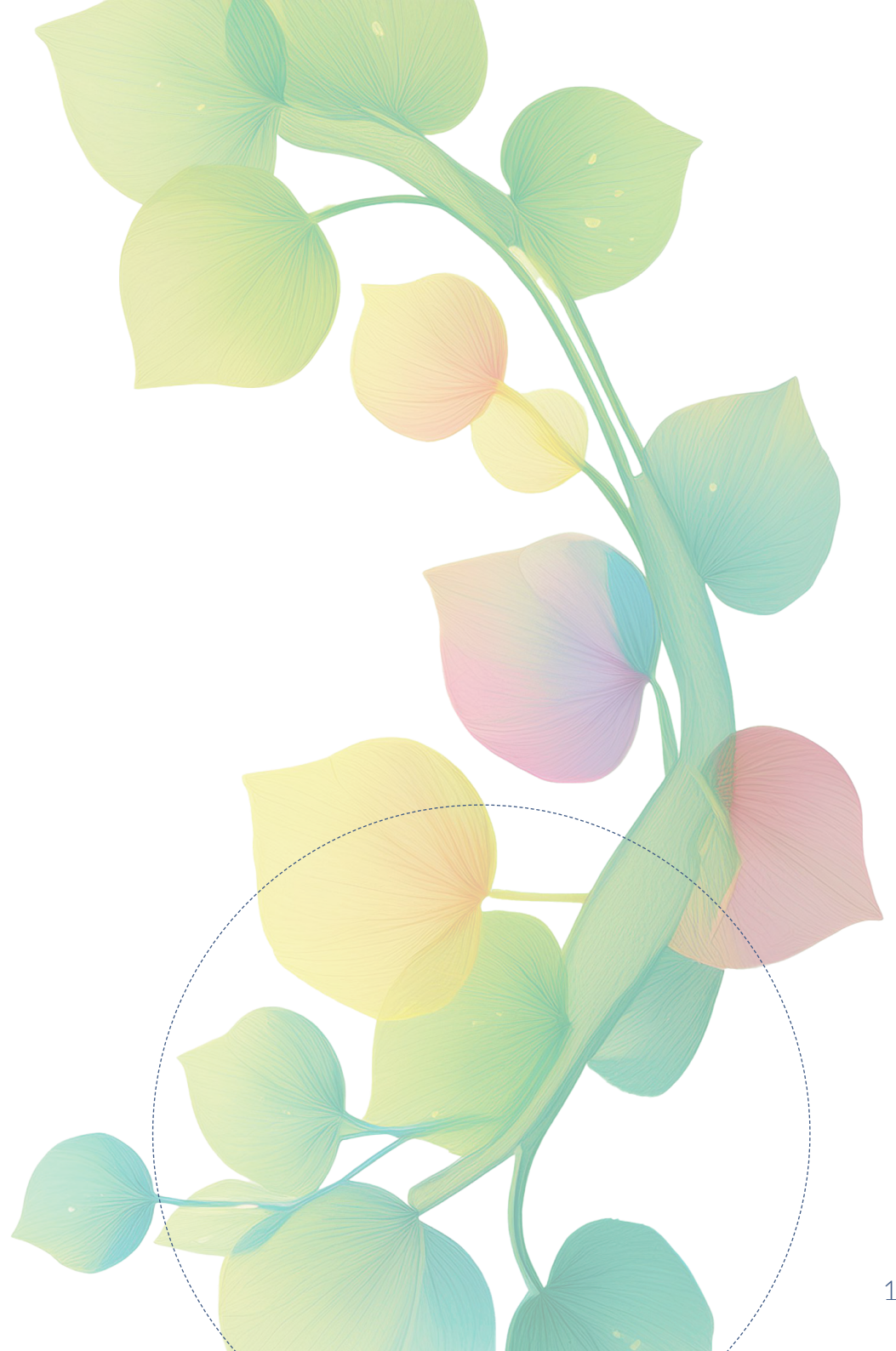
Episode 4: Dialogue as a path for recovery

Throughout this publication, we have delved into examples and case studies where dialogue, in its most genuine and vulnerable form, has been a vehicle for regeneration. In spaces, where diverse individuals come together to listen, share, and learn from one another's experiences can heal social divides and rebuild trust. This mirrors the wider regenerative process — where healing occurs not through quick fixes, but through the nurturing of relationships over time.

Episode 5: Embracing complexity

It's also clear that regenerative dialogue isn't about avoiding difficult conversations, but about embracing complexity. We must move beyond surface-level solutions and address the deeper roots of our problems, whether they are ecological, social, or psychological. As we engage with these complexities, we create space for innovation and collaborative action, bringing diverse perspectives together to co-create the future we need. The regenerative process is dynamic — it evolves as we do — and by staying open to learning and adapting, we can better respond to the challenges of an interconnected world.

Episode 6: Somatic awareness — our body remembers

Incorporating somatic and embodiment practices has been essential to our work, as we recognize that change does not happen solely in the mind, but also in the body. Our bodies carry the imprints of trauma, stress, and lived experiences, and regeneration must include a somatic awareness that allows us to process and release these embodied memories. Trauma-informed work acknowledges that many of us, whether consciously or unconsciously, are carrying the weight of personal, intergenerational, or collective trauma. This can create blockages that hinder our ability to fully engage in dialogue, connect with others, or take meaningful action.

Episode 7: Systems thinking — ripples of change

Our humble exploration of the system thinking approach here reminds us again that regeneration is not linear. It requires us to embrace the idea that small actions ripple outward, creating change in ways that we cannot always predict. But in this uncertainty lies hope, a regenerative hope rooted not in a passive wish for a better future, but in the active, grounded commitment to engage, act, and care in the present.

Episode 8: Regenerative dialogue and Nonviolent Communication

As we've reflected on empathy, vulnerability, and inclusivity throughout this handbook, it has become clear that regeneration is, at its core, a process of healing. We heal ecosystems, but also social wounds and personal traumas. This healing requires that we make space for discomfort, for listening to voices that have been silenced.

Episode 9: Regenerative education and learning

In education, we've seen that adopting a regenerative mindset transforms learning environments into spaces where individuals are not just receivers of knowledge but active participants in co-creating solutions. Facilitators and educators who embrace this mindset act not as authorities but as hosts of dialogue, creating spaces where each learner can engage with complexity, discover their own agency, and contribute meaningfully and authentically to the collective well-being.

Episode 10: Returning to the circle

Back to the circle — this is where we come full circle in our understanding of what it means to facilitate regenerative change. The circle, as a space of equality and inclusion, symbolizes the regenerative process itself. It is a reminder that the work of regeneration is never done in isolation, nor can it be imposed top-down. Instead, it is fostered through relationships, through dialogue, and through collective wisdom. In this circle, we acknowledge that every voice matters, and that the solutions we seek can only emerge from deep, sustained engagement with one another and with the systems we seek to heal.

As we return back to the circle, we are invited to slow down, to listen deeply, and to trust that through our collective efforts, the seeds of regeneration we plant today will take root and flourish.

Thanks for joining this walk. We offer this handbook as a humble guide, not at all an endpoint, as we continue to gather in circles, facilitating regenerative dialogue that heals, restores, and breathes life into our communities and ecosystems.

Toolkit for Regenerative Dialogue: Our Favourite 'Hows' for Some Whys and Whats

As practitioners, we not only value the reflective aspects of our work, but we also love applying models, frameworks, and methods. Some methods you got familiar with along the reading of the articles, here is the condensed collective treasure of tools and insights we've gained from both other practitioners and our own inventions.

We also would like to share with you our collection of Check-ins and check-outs questions, we believe they are essential components in facilitating meaningful conversations guided by trust, openness, and authentic human connection. These processes help ground participants, create safer spaces, and deepen the level of dialogue, allowing for more impactful and transformative dialogues. Grounded in principles of connection and dialogical approach, check-ins and check-outs are not just formalities but powerful tools to shape the quality of interaction within a group.

Additionally, we are sharing with you practical support in the form of a Nonviolent Communication (NVC) list of feelings and needs. You can use these lists to describe the sensations you're experiencing and to identify what truly matters to you. Feel free to print them out and place them somewhere visible, where you'll pass by throughout the day, as a reminder to check in with yourself: What is alive in me? How do I feel, and what do I need? You can also extend this curiosity to others by guessing their feelings and needs: What is alive in them? What might they feel and need?

Enjoy these collections along with the final (in this publication) "Just like Me" meditative practice.

Method: Social Network Mapping

Time
90–120 minutes

Materials Needed
Large paper or whiteboard, markers, sticky notes

Goal
Understand the complexity of relationships and influence within a network or community through visualization.

Preparation
Identify the focus of the network (e.g., a local community, an organization, a stakeholder system). Prepare instructions on how to map relationships, power dynamics, and flows of resources or information.

Activity

1 Identify key stakeholders and divide them between participants. Each participant represents a key stakeholder or entity in the network. Discuss briefly their position, tasks and function.

2 Ask participants to place themselves on the large map of the system. Using markers, participants draw lines between themselves and others to represent relationships or dependencies (solid lines for strong relationships, dotted lines for weak ones). You can also add additional layers of complexity by mapping resource flows (e.g., money, knowledge, power), identifying bottlenecks, or weak connections. Allow for discussions during drawing the map and ask additional questions.

Reflection
Debrief by analyzing patterns in the map. Discuss how relationships can be strengthened or bottlenecks removed to make the system more resilient.

Method: Identity Flower

Time
45–60 minutes

Materials Needed
Paper, markers, crayons, reflective music (optional)

Goal
Reflect on personal identity, explore self-awareness, and identify relational connections.

Preparation
None. If you want you can prepare a sample identity flower.

Reflection
Participants reflect on how roles, relationships, and future expectations shape their identity. They also share insights gained from the activity.

Activity

1 Provide each participant with a sheet of paper and a marker, and invite them to find a comfortable spot to reflect. Create a calm atmosphere, possibly playing soft reflective music. Explain that you will read a set of questions and they will have time to reflect on them and write down their answers. Emphasize that they will not share their answers with anyone.

2 Start with the first question "Who are you?" After a while, ask the next question: "Who are you?". Repeat this question a total of six times to allow for deeper reflection with each iteration.

3 Guide participants through self-reflection while asking following questions:
Which of your answers feel especially important to you at this moment and why?
Which of your answers describe the roles you hold? How do these different roles shape your identity?
Which of your answers describe the relationships you have? How do these relationships influence your identity and the way you see yourself?
Which answers would you describe as "inherited" and which ones as "chosen"?
Which answers do you expect to change in the next five years, and how?

4 Give each participant another sheet of paper and ask them to draw a simple flower: a circle in the center with their name and petals. Instruct them to write an important element of their identity on each petal. Emphasize that they will share their thoughts afterwards with others in the group.

5 Ask participants to form small groups of 3-4 people to discuss different aspects of their identity and their reflections. After everyone in the small group has shared, invite them to notice any commonalities and differences among their identities. Debrief the exercise in the large group.

Method: Circle Practice

Time
60–90 minutes

Materials Needed
Talking piece, chairs arranged in a circle

Goal
Create a safe space for open dialogue where everyone can share their voice equally.

Preparation
Arrange chairs in a circle with no hierarchy, in the center of the circle you can place the objects that represent the intention of the circle. Choose a talking piece (any object passed around in group discussions, giving the holder the exclusive right to speak, while others listen). Prepare a guiding question or theme for the conversation.

Activity

1   Open the circle with a check-in question, inviting participants to share a brief response.

2   Introduce the guiding question and pass the talking piece clockwise around the circle. Introduce the rule that only the person holding the piece speaks, while others listen.

3   Continue the conversation in rounds.

4   Conclude with a check-out round.

Reflection
Participants reflect on how it felt to listen and share without interruption, how the talking piece influenced their engagement, and what insights emerged from the dialogue.

Method: Spectrogram

Time
30–45 minutes

Materials Needed
Masking tape, statements for discussion

Goal
Engage participants in exploring diverse perspectives by positioning themselves physically along a continuum of agreement or disagreement.

Preparation
Place a long line of masking tape on the floor to represent a spectrum, with one end as "Strongly Agree" and the other as "Strongly Disagree." Prepare statements related to the conversation topic (e.g. "Climate change is the most urgent issue of our time").

Activity

1   Read a statement aloud and ask participants to physically position themselves along a spectrum, indicating their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement.

2   Once participants are positioned, ask a few people standing in various parts of the spectrum to explain their position.

3   Ask deepening questions to support participants in naming their deeper motivations and beliefs behind their opinions.

4   Continue with additional statements. You can also invite participants to formulate their own statements related to the topic and propose them to the group.

Reflection
Participants reflect on their experience and what new insights they gained through the conversation.

Method: Nine Whys

Time

60–90 minutes

Materials Needed

Large sheets of paper, markers, sticky notes

Goal

Uncover underlying motivations behind decisions or challenges by asking "Why?" nine times.

Preparation

Choose a specific topic or issue participants will explore.

Activity

1. Divide participants into pairs. In each pair, one participant will ask, "Why is this important?" or "Why does this matter to you?" The other person will respond, exploring their opinion. After the answer, the asker will repeat, "Why?" Continue this process for a total of nine times, allowing the responder to delve into the deeper reasons behind their views with each iteration.

2. After 5 minutes, participants change roles and repeat the process.

3. Ask pairs to join another pair and share their reflections. Then, bring everyone together as a large group for a debrief.

Reflection

Participants reflect on how it felt to listen and share without interruption, how the talking piece influenced their engagement, and what insights emerged from the dialogue.

Source: Lipmanowicz, H., & McCandless, K. (2013). The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures: Simple Rules to Unleash A Culture of Innovation.

Method: Dialogue in 4 Corners

Time

60–90 minutes

Materials Needed

Paper, markers, tape, large room

Goal

Create dialogue space and develop dialogue competencies for discussing divisive or polarizing topics.

Preparation

Choose a topic and prepare 4-6 statements about it. Set up four corners of the room labeled: "I AGREE," "I DISAGREE," "I DO NOT KNOW," "PERHAPS."

Reflection

Participants reflect on how it was to listen and share and how the dialogue influenced their opinions and views.

Activity

1. Present principles of dialogue. Shortly talk about what they mean and ask participants if they want to add any.

   Principles of Dialogue:

   - Confidentiality.
   - Be curious about the other person and their experience.
   - Receive the other person with openness and acceptance, assume good intentions.
   - Speak from heart and on your behalf. Use "I" language.
   - Explain your thoughts, opinions and beliefs.

2. Introduce the exercise and conduct a brief demo with a neutral statement to explain the process.

3. Read the first statement, and ask participants to move to the corner that best reflects their opinion. Emphasize that they can change their position at any time if their view changes.

4. Once everyone has chosen a corner, invite a few participants from different corners to share why they chose their position.

5. After the exchange about the first statement, ask participants to return to the center, and then read the next statement. Continue this process for 4-5 statements, adjusting based on the flow and engagement.

6. After the exercise, gather participants in a circle and open the dialogue by asking an open-ended question to deepen the discussion about the topic

Source: Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue. The Nansen Handbook for Trainers in Dialogue and Conflict Transformation. Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue, 2021.

Method: Wicked Questions

Time
30–40 minutes

Materials Needed
Paper, markers, sticky notes

Goal
Delve into deeper questions by transforming personal questions into more powerful ones.

Preparation
None.

Activity

1. Ask participants to take 3 minutes to write down a personal, meaningful question they'd like to explore. The question can be connected to the topic they are exploring.

2. Ask participants to form groups of four. First person presents their question while the others ask questions about that question to explore its meaning. Remind participants that they should only ask questions; no statements, comments, or answers are allowed. The question holder listens without answering, reflecting on their deeper calling. Repeat this process for each group member.Every round lasts 4 minutes.

3. Invite participants to reflect in small groups and collect their insights.

4. Debrief in the large group.

Reflection
Participants share insights about the transformation of their questions and the powerful experience of asking without answering.

Method: Wicked Problem Garden

Time
60–90 minutes

Materials Needed
Garden imagery (optional), sticky notes, flipchart or whiteboard

Goal
To explore regenerative solutions to wicked problems through the metaphor of cultivating a garden.

Preparation
Define a wicked problem related to regeneration (e.g., "How can we address food security while regenerating ecosystems?"). Use a visual garden metaphor, imagining the problem as a tangled, overgrown garden that needs tending.

Activity

1. Introduce the topic and explain the metaphor of a garden, where "weeds" represent obstacles to regeneration, and "seeds" symbolize regenerative solutions. Ask participants to identify the "weeds" hindering regeneration (e.g., overconsumption, unsustainable policies) and write them on sticky notes, placing them in the "garden" space. Then, ask them to identify "seeds" of solutions and the necessary "resources" (water, sunlight) that will help these solutions grow.

2. Ask participants to discuss in pairs where they can see opportunities for involvement at different levels — personal, community, and systemic.

Reflection
Participants discuss how the metaphor of the garden helped clarify the challenges and solutions. They reflect on their learnings.

Method: Appreciative Triad

Time
45–60 minutes

Materials Needed
None

Goal
Explore personal strengths and discover solutions through the power of positive inquiry.

Preparation
None.

Reflection
Participants reflect on the positive stories and inquire about how they can use their strengths and values to address current challenges.

Activity

1. Invite participants to reflect on and recall a personal story of success, strength, or past achievement.

2. Divide them into groups of three, and have each participant take on three different roles across three rounds: storyteller, listener, and witness.

3. In each round:
   - The storyteller shares their story.
   - The listener listens deeply, aiming to understand, sense the underlying meaning, and appreciate the storyteller's journey.
   - The witness observes at a meta-level, paying attention to non-verbal communication, shifts in body language, and the overall dynamics of the conversation.

   Listeners are encouraged to ask thoughtful, appreciative questions but should refrain from giving feedback or making judgmental comments. The goal is to help the storyteller unlock the power of their story and uncover the strengths, actions, and mindsets that led to their success.

4. After the first story is shared, participants rotate roles, allowing everyone to experience each perspective.

Source: Cooperrider, D. L., & Whitney, D. (2005). Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Method: Pro-Action Café

Time
90–120 minutes

Materials Needed
Flipchart, markers, paper, space to move between café-style tables

Goal
Facilitate action-oriented discussions where participants explore projects or challenges collaboratively and brainstorm solutions.

Preparation
Arrange the space with tables for small group discussions. Prepare participants to ask and answer open-ended questions in rounds to stimulate deep dialogue.

Activity

1. Collect the topics for the discussion and assign them to tables. Every table has a host — the person who is staying there during the whole process and making the notes.

2. Small groups move in a few rounds between different "café tables" to provide feedback, insights, and suggestions connected to the topic.

3. After all the rounds are completed, the hosts present their group's work and share the key insights and ideas gathered throughout the process.

Reflection
Participants share the key insights.

Source: The Art of Hosting. Pro Action Café: A Creative and Action-Oriented Dialogue Method. Available at: https://www.sessionlab.com/methods/pro-action-cafe.

Method: Forum Theatre

Time

90–120 minutes

Materials Needed

A stage, chairs

Goal

Use participatory theater to explore social issues by engaging the audience in problem-solving and decision-making scenarios presented in a live performance.

Preparation

Create a script based on real-life social issues. Recruit volunteer actors to perform. Set up a stage area and prepare the audience to engage in interactive dialogue and decision-making during the performance.

Activity

1 The actors perform a short play that presents a selected conflict or social issue. The play is repeated, and at various moments, it can be stopped to allow audience members to step in and replace an actor, changing the outcome or approaching the situation differently.

2 The new actor explores different actions or dialogues, trying out various solutions and perspectives.

3 After several interventions, gather everyone for a debriefing session in the large group.

Reflection

Participants reflect on the insights gained from the Forum Theatre exercise and how they can relate them to real-life situations. They discuss the possible solutions and reactions explored during the performances, evaluating their effectiveness in addressing the given conflict or social issue.

Method: Living Library

Time

60–90 minutes

Materials Needed

Volunteers (living books), comfortable chairs

Goal

Create an experiential learning space where participants can "borrow" a living book and engage in one-on-one conversations to learn about a person's life experiences.

Preparation

Recruit volunteers (living books) who are willing to share personal stories. Set up a space where participants can sit comfortably with the books and listen to their stories. Prepare a short description about every "book".

Activity

1 Introduce the activity and explain the time frames and time slots. Present the available "living books" and allow participants to choose the ones they are interested in, signing up for specific time slots.

2 During each time slot, participants will engage in a one-on-one dialogue with their chosen "book," listening to the person's story and asking questions. After the conversation, they can either return the book and borrow a new one or stay longer to continue the discussion, based on the remaining time slots.

3 Gather everyone in the large group to debrief the activity.

Reflection

Participants reflect on what they learned from the living books and whether they discovered something new. They connect their experience with familiar narratives and reflect on any biases they may have encountered or reconsidered during the conversations.

Method: A Problem Chair

Time
10–15 minutes

Materials Needed
Chairs, enough space

Goal
This method can serve as a warm-up or open a discussion about how the group or society handles problems.

Preparation
Arrange as many chairs as there are participants plus one additional chair. Place the chairs randomly around the room

Activity

1   Ask participants to sit in the chairs. Explain that you will be playing the role of the "problem," and your task is to occupy the free chair while participants try to prevent you from doing so. The only rule is that once they stand up, they cannot return to their original chair and must first sit in a different one.

2   Repeat the game with a few more people.

3   Debrief the exercise

Reflection
Participants share how it was to sit near the free chair, how they made decisions, and how this relates to problem-solving in real-life dilemmas and challenges.

Method: Philosophy with Children

Time
60–90 minutes

Materials Needed
Stimulus (e.g., text, quote, image, video), flipchart, markers

Goal
Explore abstract concepts or philosophical problems through structured dialogue.

Preparation
Choose a topic (e.g., time, truth, democracy), select a stimulus (e.g., a quote, short text, picture), and prepare guiding questions.

Activity

1   Present the stimulus. Invite the group to generate as many open-ended questions connected to the topic as possible. Note all the questions on the flipchart. Ensure that each question is open-ended, meaning it cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Clarify and paraphrase questions to confirm understanding and accurately capture the group's intent. Though this may slow the process, it leads to more thoughtful, focused questioning.

2   Invite the group to select one question for discussion, using methods like dot voting. Once chosen, the session will center on that question.

3   Have the question's author briefly explain its background or intent, then invite others to respond. Facilitate the process - you can mirror, clarify, and ask follow-up questions to deepen the discussion.

4   Debrief the exercise in the circle.

Reflection
Participants reflects on their insights, key takeaways, and explorations.

Method: Fishbowl

Time

45–90 minutes

Materials Needed

Large empty room, chairs

Goal

Facilitate group dialogue and practice dialogue competencies through structured conversation.

Preparation

Choose an open-ended question for discussion. Set up an inner circle of chairs (4-6) and an outer circle of chairs in the room.

Activity

1 Present principles of dialogue. Shortly talk about what they mean and ask participants if they want to add any.

   Principles of Dialogue:

   - Confidentiality.
   - Be curious about the other person and their experience.
   - Receive the other person with openness and acceptance, assume good intentions.
   - Speak from heart and on your behalf. Use "I" language.
   - Explain your thoughts, opinions and beliefs.

2 Introduce the exercise. Explain that only participants in the inner circle will speak while those in the outer circle will listen. Clarify that at any moment, participants in the inner circle can choose to leave and move to the outer circle, while anyone in the outer circle can join the inner circle by taking an empty chair.

3 Sit in the inner circle and facilitate the conversation. Allow it to flow, mirror key points, ask deepening questions.

4 Once the discussion is over, gather everyone in a circle to debrief.

Reflection

Participants reflect on how it was to participate in both circles. They share their observations and insights and recall key points from the conversation.

Check-in and Check-out Questions

CLUSTER	CHECK-IN QUESTIONS	CHECK-OUT QUESTIONS
Emotional openness	○ What is alive in you right now? ○ How are you arriving today, emotionally and mentally? ○ If your energy was weather, what would it be?	○ What is alive in you as we close? ○ What's one thing that you want to bring forward after today?
Personal connection	○ What's one thing about you that others might not see at first glance? ○ What's something important happening in your life right now? ○ What value do you hold closest to your heart in this moment?	○ What story from today will you remember most? ○ What personal value feels affirmed or challenged by today's conversation? ○ What connection to others did you explore today?
Lighthearted/ fun	○ If you could have any superpower, what would it be? ○ What's the most fun thing you did in the last week? ○ If you could be any fictional character for a day, who would you choose? ○ What's the silliest thing that made you laugh recently?	○ What's one funny or light moment that stood out to you today? ○ What's something that made you smile during our time together? ○ What's one playful idea you're taking away from today?
Mindfulness/ presence	○ What body sensations are you noticing as we start today? What do you feel they are inviting or calling you toward? ○ What did you leave at the door when you arrived today? ○ What color best represents how you're feeling at this moment? ○ What's a sound or sensation you're aware of right now?	○ What do you feel more present to after today? ○ What do you need to let go of as we close? ○ What body sensations are you noticing as we come to a close? What do you feel they are inviting or calling you toward?
Gratitude/ appreciation	○ What are you grateful for at this moment? ○ Who or what in your life has recently inspired you? ○ What's something small that brought you joy today?	○ What or who are you grateful for after today's session? ○ What are you grateful for to yourself after today? ○ What's one act of kindness you experienced today? ○ What's something from today's gathering you appreciate the most?

CLUSTER	CHECK-IN QUESTIONS	CHECK-OUT QUESTIONS
Creativity/ imagination	○ If you could paint your current mood, what colors would you use? ○ What's one dream or vision that excites you right now? ○ If today were a chapter in your life, what would its title be? ○ What's one wild idea you've had lately?	○ If today were a painting, what would it look like? ○ If today had a soundtrack, what song would represent it? ○ What's a creative spark or idea that emerged for you today?
Personal reflection	○ What has your journey looked like to get here today? ○ What's a question that's been on your mind lately? ○ What's one thing you're currently learning about yourself?	○ What's one insight about yourself that emerged today?
Community/ belonging	○ What makes you feel part of a community? ○ Who or what supports you in being in connection with others? ○ What's something you love about being part of a group?	○ What's one way you experienced connection today? ○ What role do you want to play in this community going forward?
Learning and curiosity	○ What's something you're curious about today? ○ What's one thing you've always wanted to learn? ○ What's a recent learning experience that challenged you? What questions are you hoping to explore today?	○ What's something new you learned today? ○ What's one question you're taking away from today?
Vision/future- focused	○ What's one hope or dream you're carrying into today? ○ If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be? ○ What's one goal you're excited to work toward?	○ What's one future possibility you feel excited about after today? ○ What's one small step towards a change you want to make after today? ○ What's your next step toward a goal or dream you're working on?
Challenge/ bravery	○ What's one challenge you're currently facing? ○ What's one brave thing you've done recently? ○ What's something you're afraid to say but want to share? What would support you to share it?	○ What challenge or obstacle did you confront today? ○ What's one brave conversation you had today? ○ What fear or hesitation do you feel less of after today?

Just Like Me

Many conscious and unconscious factors can make us feel separate from others. We may experience bias or feel "othered" due to differences in background, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, education, status, politics, geography, and more. Sometimes, this feeling is triggered by the behavior of other people, sometimes by our own thoughts.

We often default to focusing on "us" vs. "them" — a survival instinct through which we are trying to re-establish safety. But in communication and relationships this mindset can lead to shame, blame, isolation, or hatred.

But there are alternative ways to address our biases instead of following them or denying they exist. One of the antidotes lies in recognizing our shared humanity. When we focus on what connects us, we open the door to empathy and compassion. We share the same needs, hopes and challenges even if we sometimes choose very different ways to address them. For regenerative dialogue and learning, it's crucial to find every possible way to reconnect on a deeply human level without losing our own self.

Chade-Meng Tan, author of Search Inside Yourself, explains why this simple practice is so powerful: when we see someone as similar to us, we naturally feel more empathy and act more kindly toward them. Science supports this, and the good news is we can grow our empathy through practice. By seeing others as "just like us" and wishing them well, we create a circle of kindness and compassion. This doesn't necessarily mean agreeing with or accepting their behavior, but it can open the door to new possibilities and responses, coming from a place of greater choice.

We would like to finish this publication with the meditation of Sharon Salzberg. You can practice it in many situations — from crowds and traffic jams to work challenges and personal conflicts. It's just as effective with strangers as with loved ones.

You can use traditional phrases for this practice or adapt them to your needs and make them your own.[16]

Practice: Just Like Me

Time commitment	Get ready
2–10 minutes	Sit quietly, if circumstances allow. Or perhaps you are on a crowded train. Wherever you may be, draw your attention inward. Breathe in and breathe out for several cycles of natural breath to help quiet and rest your mind. Feel your body down through your legs, the soles of your feet, and connected into the earth.

The practice

Bring someone to mind, and see a picture of them in your mind's eye. Or maybe they are sitting right in front of you :)

Acknowledge that they are simply human, just like you.
Repeat any number of phrases, while at the same time thinking of them.
Pause at the end of each phrase to reflect and remember we are all human.

This person was born into this world, just like me.
This person has a body and mind, just like me.
This person has experienced suffering, just like me.
This person has been sad, angry, or hurt, just like me.
This person is sometimes scared and worried, just like me.
This person wants to be loved and understood, just like me.
This person wants to be seen and heard, just like me.
This person wants to be safe and healthy, just like me.
This person wants to belong, just like me.
This person wants to be happy, just like me.

I wish for this person to be free from pain and suffering.
I wish for this person to be safe from harm.
I wish for this person to have health and wellbeing.
I wish for this person to move through life with ease.
I wish for this person to be happy.
Because this person is a fellow human being, just like me.

Closing

Take another few rounds of natural breath, checking in with how you are feeling at this moment. What body sensations and feelings arise?

Nonviolent Communication
Lists of Feelings and Needs[17]

FEELINGS you may experience when your needs are met

AFFECTIONATE	Warm, Tender, Sensitive, Touched, Close, Friendly, Compassionate, Loving
ENGAGED	Curious, Eager, Enthusiastic, Inspired, Fascinated, Interested, Intrigued, Involved, Excited, Stimulated
HOPEFUL	Optimistic
CONFIDENT	Focused, Certain, Clear, Attentive, Safe, Secure
ENERGETIC	Encouraged, Lively, Passionate, Eager, Enthusiastic, Giddy, Invigorated, Surprised, Vibrant
GRATEFUL	Appreciative, Moved, Thankful, Touched
JOYFUL	Amused, Pleased, Delighted, Glad, Happy, Proud, Cheerful, Tickled
EXHILARATED	Blissful, Ecstatic, Elated, Enthralled, Exuberant, Radiant, Rapturous, Thrilled
PEACEFUL	Calm, Comfortable, Centered, Content, Fulfilled, Carefree, Quiet, Relaxed, Relieved, Satisfied, Serene, Still, Settled, Tranquil, Trusting, Open, Grounded
REFRESHED	Relieved, Relaxed

FEELINGS you may experience when your needs are not met

SCARED	Surprised, Anxious, Frightened, Panicked, Scared, Terrified, Nervous, Shocked, Horrified, Worried
ANNOYED	Aggravated, Frustrated, Impatient, Irritated, Unsettled, Grumpy
ANGRY	Furious, Incensed, Indignant, Irate, Livid, Outraged, Resentful
TIRED	Apathetic, Bored, Distant, Disconnected, Distracted, Drained, Frazzled, Numb, Shutdown, Exhausted, Lethargic, Burnt out, Sleepy, Withdrawn
UNCOMFORTABLE	Uneasy, Unsettled, Upset, Shaky, Overwhelmed, Stressed, Impatient, Lonely, Miserable, Restless, In pain
SAD	Depressed, Lonely, Upset, Hurt, Regretful, Devastated, Heartbroken, Disparate, Disappointed, Discouraged, Disheartened, Gloomy, Helpless, Heavy-hearted, Hopeless, Melancholy, Unhappy, Full of sorrow
EMBARRASSED	Ashamed, Chagrined, Flustered, Guilty, Mortified
AVERSION	Aloof, Resistant, Indifferent, Contemptuous, Disgusted, Hateful, Hostile, Envious, Jealous
CONFUSED	Unclear, Reluctant, Troubled, Stuck, Baffled, Bewildered, Dazed, Hesitant, Lost, Perplexed, Puzzled, Torn

[17]Adapted from the original list of feelings and needs presented by Marshall Rosenberg in his book "Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life." Compiled and formatted by Bĕtka Wójcik

Nonviolent Communication
Lists of Feelings and Needs

LIST OF NEEDS

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING	Air, Food, Movement/exercise, Rest, Sensuality, Touch, Safety, Shelter, Water, Sunlight, Earth, Nature

----

AUTONOMY	Choice, Freedom, Independence, Space, Spontaneity, Choosing dreams, goals, values, Choosing plans for fulfilling one's dreams, goals, values, Self-expression, Agency, Impact, Honesty

----

RELATING	Connection, Acceptance, Contribution, Feedback, Interdependence, Transparency, Affection, Appreciation, Shared reality, Belonging, Being heard/seen, Cooperation, To matter, Participation, Communication, Closeness, Community, Companionship, Compassion, Consideration, Empathy, Inclusion, Intimacy, Sexuality, Love, Mutuality, Respect, Sharing, Support, To be understood, Trust, Warmth

----

SELF-CONNECTION	Authenticity, Integrity, Creativity, Awareness, Consciousness, Competence, Self-expression, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Growth, Purpose, Self-respect, Self-realization, Self-acceptance, Development, Celebrating, Mourning

----

JOY OF LIFE	Joy, Humour, Fun, Diversity, Adventure, Ease, Beauty, Inspiration, Hope, Comfort, Well-being

----

CONNECTION WITH THE WORLD	Peace, Consistency, Meaning, Learning, Exploration, Clarity, Understanding, Challenge, Stimulation, Harmony, Stability, Coherence, Order/Predictability, Flexibility

----

Harvesting Team: Learners and Practitioners Who Prepared This Publication

Authors

Bětka Wójcik is a trainer and facilitator with a background in pedagogy. She is passionate about creating safe spaces for genuine exchange and collaborative learning, both in-person and virtually. Her areas of expertise include dialogue, Nonviolent Communication (NVC), resilience, and trauma-sensitive collaboration. She also delivers training for trainers and teaches facilitation skills. Her encounter with Nonviolent Communication several years ago was a turning point, and it has become essential to her life and work with people. She integrates this practice to support the development of authentic relationships and resilient communities. Her dream of creating a world where everyone's needs matter drives and motivates her to work. At her community work, she supports and co-creates projects and complex programs which empower young people, changemakers and communities in Poland and Georgia. She feels at home in different places across the world and most of all she enjoys time spent with her children, who are her greatest teachers.

Christa Cocciole has 30+ years of international experience as a Body Oriented Systems Therapist (DGSF) and Consultant for Embodied Leadership with a specialization in Trauma. With her work, she supports Civil Society organizations as well as communities to strengthen resilience and increase systemic social impact. She has brought her somatic approach to places such as Bosnia during and after the war, psychiatric hospitals, in addition to community building projects on issues around embodied social justice in the US and across Europe. She currently works as a therapist, facilitator and trainer (in person and online) with individuals, teams, groups and organizations in transformation processes.

Corinna Thiel is a geographer with over 13 years of experience in education for sustainable development, working with young people, adults, and mixed groups. She now works as a climate protection manager in a small city in Brandenburg, where communication is key to implementing change. In her adopted home, a small village, she fosters connections by organizing cultural events that bring people together and encourage dialogue. She shares her passion for sailing as a crew member on a sailing ship project. Corinna draws her greatest strength from being outdoors and from the deep friendships that accompany her.

Dagmar Hoder has a background in geoecology and works as an educator at Tipu Nature School in Southwest Estonia. She enjoys working with children and youth, blending education with practical skills and nature protection activities. Dagmar is committed to creating an inspiring learning environment and a safe space for young people to explore and gain new experiences. She also serves on the board of the Estonian Environmental Education Association. Living in a small village near Soomaa National Park, she loves gardening and growing her own food.

Julian Czurko, Ph.D., is a trainer, coach, facilitator, educator, and youth mentor. As an educational supervisor and dialogue facilitator, he uses methods of Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue, Clean Coaching, Action Learning, Design For Change, Non-Violent Resistance, and the JAK-MD process approach. He is the co-founder and chairman of the board of the Owoc Spotkania Foundation. Julian specializes in training in soft skills, digital skills, and critical and creative thinking.

Marta Gawinek Dagragulia is a training designer and facilitator with a background in intercultural communication and adult education. Her passion lies in designing group learning processes and supporting diverse teams in growing together. She has created and led complex train-the-trainer courses for international groups and has published books on facilitation, intercultural communication, and project management. She has worked in the Caucasus, Central Europe, Germany and MENA region creating spaces for empowering individuals and communities. She has coordinated long-term civic education programs for changemakers, mentors, and professionals in the civil society sector, as well as programs supporting internally displaced persons and refugees in the South Caucasus and Poland. Her focus areas include holistic facilitation, empathic communication, and working in diverse teams. In her free time, she loves dancing, hiking, and learning languages.

Editor

Maxim Smekhov is an interdisciplinary process artist, storyteller, and facilitator deeply committed to fostering systemic change through the power of community and story-telling. Grounded in participatory approaches, he believes in the importance of relationships and the collective wisdom that emerges when people come together. With a rich background in the nonprofit sector, Maxim brings extensive experience as a program manager, producer and strategist. His work centers on projects that inspire transformative learning, regenerate communities, support trauma healing, and encourage cultural rethinking — always aiming to create spaces where true connection and change can thrive.

Co-creators of the project and project managers

The project "The Dilemma of Sustainable Choices" was was co-created and managed by Corinna Thiel and Sebastian Wehrsig (Villa Fohrde), Bětka Wójcik (Galician Foundation of Development and Education) and Dagmar Hoder (Tipu Nature School).

Visual sense-making and design

Anastasia Skosyrskaya