

# **Presenting in International Development Cooperation**

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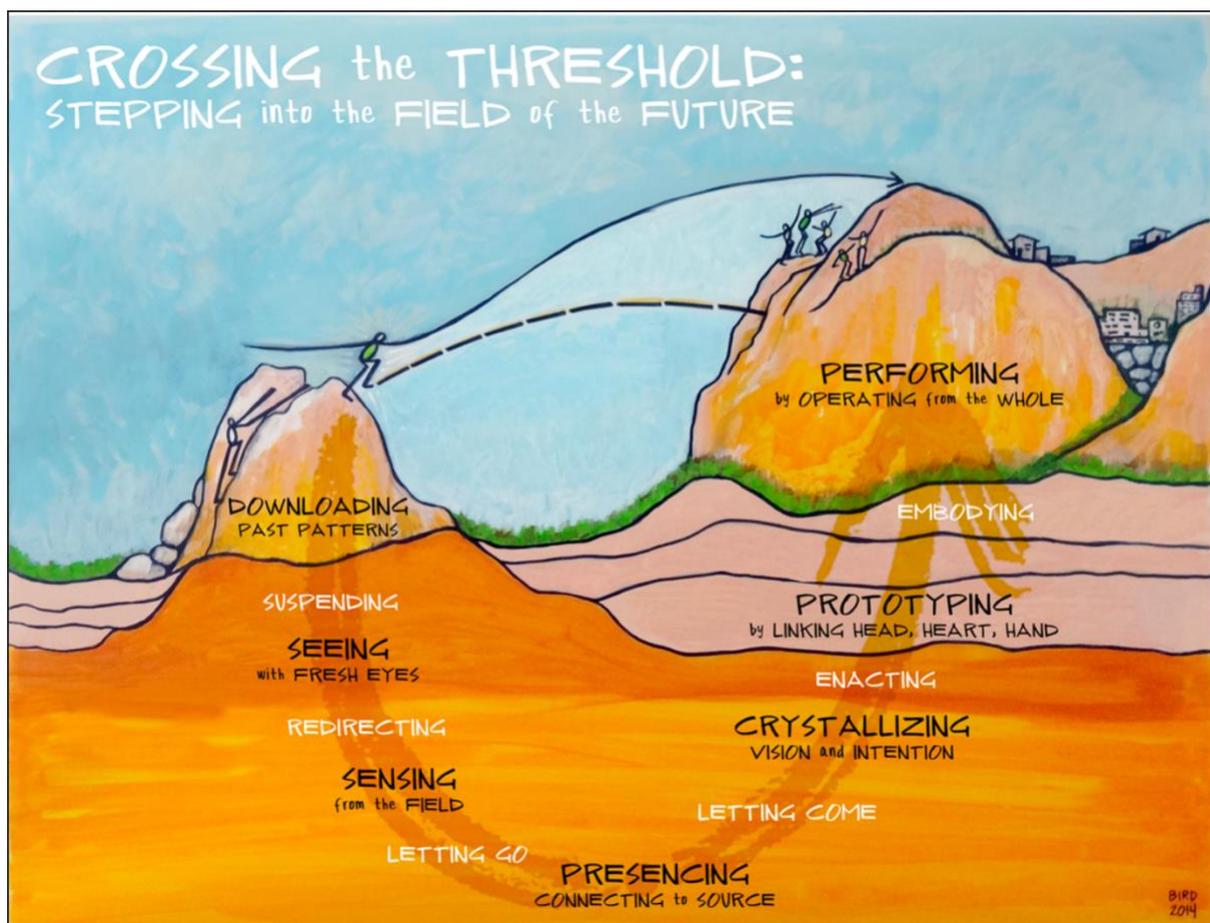
Annual Reflection 2020

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

We wrote this article from our home offices due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which made the invitation of MIT’s u.lab training course seem all the more relevant: How can humanity find a way to a future that cares for everyone on the planet and the planet itself?

Both authors are part of a group of development consultants from various parts of the world and different development consultancies who got to know each other while participating in the u.lab online course in 2018. The course, which is presented annually, is an introduction to Theory U, a method developed at MIT’s Centre for Organizational Learning. Theory U is a change management method and the title of a book by Otto Scharmer. The name is derived from the graphic representation of a social transformation process in the form of the letter U (see figure). Otto Scharmer calls this process *presencing*, a term that he made up to express the combination of “presence” and “sensing”.

Our group has learnt to appreciate this state of being present – with hearts, hands and minds – which will assist us to understand more about current situations and what the future might hold.



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

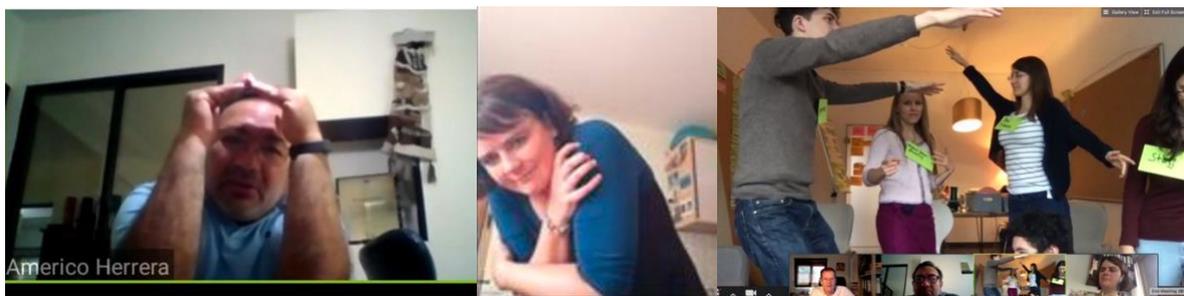
In presencing, the participants do not deconstruct reality analytically and then try to conceive a solution to a problem directly from the analytical understanding. **They adopt an attitude that activates their intuition and feelings and which goes beyond analytical thinking.**

Our group of practitioners started meeting regularly during the u.lab training. **All our sessions always begin with a moment of silence.** A conscious start makes a big difference to the working atmosphere of the group. As they felt the positive effect of such a start, the members of the group at times also began to use this 'quiet entry' in our consulting work and during workshops. In the group we also tried out other simple forms of mindfulness, which are more accessible to people less involved in mindfulness practice, such as one-breath meditation or walking meditation.

**In the Theory U process, participants consciously embark on a journey of co-sensing instead of engaging in an efficient analytical process,** starting at the upper left side of the U. At this point, participants are invited to let go of their preconceived explanations of how things work, as well as their value judgments about what is right. Instead, they are asked to pay close attention to what they experience during the process of co-sensing and while listening to various people in the system they are engaging with. By letting go of what we think we know, we create space for something new. After co-sensing, when the practitioners reach the bottom of the U, there is a moment of presencing and opening up. This is the moment when the practitioner is invited to get the first glimpse of a new, shapeable future. In the ascending part of the U that follows, this glimpse of the future is further crystallised. This is followed by an iterative process of prototyping and concretising the change.

**But how can you let go of your judgements and be open to new ideas to come,** without analytically deducing them? Theory U provides very concrete and handy tools. They consist of practices that open up experiences beyond the conscious mind using non-verbal communication or embodied practices, often supported by mutual silence.

One of the **non-verbal techniques** our group has often used to explore a 'stuck' situation in personal and organisational life is Social Presencing Theatre<sup>1</sup>. These body-based practices increase sensitivity to current experiences – they draw attention to changes in social or contextual areas and are a method of sowing seeds for the future.



*Connected by video, the group members made the gestures of the SPT exercises in front of the camera and sometimes invited other colleagues to meetings.*

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

New ideas also came from 3D sculpting exercises using stones, sticks and Playmobil to represent our complex working realities. This helped the group members to see new connections between the actors or thoughts about influences from the past. It allows us to rearrange the actors in ways that open up opportunities for the future. In the joint practice, we were able to experience how Theory U can help to overcome societal or cultural frontiers which also exist in development cooperation.



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

The *Joyn-coop* office in Munich invited an intern, Saka Mora, from rural Benin to join the group's exercises. With impressive ease he engaged in the bodywork of the Social Presencing Theatre and said that the methods were just beautiful. The group reflected on how they could build bridges to the knowledge and wisdom of people from oral cultures – in the past, the group members only used analytical methods and visualisations based on writing. The participants started to question some approaches which they used in the past.



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

Mesopartner used the instrument 'Village' in a project planning mission. We invited the stakeholders to move in a defined space using only a limited selection of movements. The exercise tries to answer the question of how the participants feel and act in the social system. It also asks, while participating in the Village exercise itself, how and where attention and action are needed in order to bring out the potential of the group. The exercise provided us with insights into the dynamics of the cooperation system. One insight is that without specific objectives, some participants lack orientation; other participants appreciate the intellectual freedom of non-verbal communication. Such insights can be used very well in project management.



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

After the end of the u.lab online course, our group of development practitioners continued working together. The group members valued the virtual meetings as an opportunity to experiment with new methods, to give collegial advice and deep sharing among people they trust. Step by step, group members have been integrating the philosophy and instruments of Theory U and social presencing into their consulting work. The mostly positive reaction of our customers and participants has motivated us to continue.

The experience of letting go of cherished beliefs frees and enables the group members to embrace new situations openly. We were convinced that in a time of increasing uncertainties, this way of approaching complex social systems is pertinent and particularly suitable for accompanying development processes in a positive way. Listening to our bodies brings new intelligence. It is also enriching to see us as consultants as part of a larger social body. Change is not the task of a leader or consultant, but a collective response of a social system.

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