

Hosting humanizing practices in times of complexity:  
Lessons to be learned from Paulo Freire

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## **Abstract**

This work is intended as an analysis of possible links between educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's thinking on dialogue, and the Art of Hosting (an international community of dialogue-based practitioners) as an approach to 'hosting conversations that matter'. This study was conducted by thoroughly reviewing Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as well as conducting a literature review of a selection of his other works, and the analysis and commentary of other authors on Freire's thinking. In order to gain a strong understanding and perspective on the Art of Hosting (AoH), the author turned to the few academic articles that have been written on AoH, as well as reviewing multiple handbooks produced to accompany AoH events around the world, examining the various online sites related to AoH, and the related blogosphere. Finally, the author conducted six semi-structured interviews with self-identified Art of Hosting practitioners using questions influenced and inspired by Freire's views on dialogue. The result of this research brought the author to delve into a personal exploration on how her professional practice as a facilitator offers her an opportunity to directly, and indirectly, address the societal issues about which she is concerned, and how she is influenced and inspired by both a philosophical grounding in the work of Paulo Freire, and by the shared assumptions she encounters in the Art of Hosting community.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated

### **To my Institute family (1998-2012)**

|                        |                 |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| Mireille Landry        | Lance Evoy      |
| Nicole Yip-Hoi         | Brian Murphy    |
| Isabelle Abdel-Sayed   | Tracey Lindeman |
| Kèmi Fakambi           | Fred Anderson   |
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*And, to the many, many others that were...*

### **To my percolab family (since 2013)**

|                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
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*Who have simply always been...*

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And, to the millions of people, the world over, who engage in conversations, dialogue, thinking  
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## **Introduction: When dialogue is an existential necessity**

### **The Conference Recipe: Keynote, speaker, panel. Repeat.**

In 2003, many years before I ever read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, or heard of the Art of Hosting, I seized upon the opportunity to attend a conference sponsored by the Transformative Learning Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). The three-day event held from October 17 to 19, 2003 was entitled “*Lifelong citizenship learning, participatory democracy and social change: Local and global perspectives*”. Considering my work at the time consisted of supporting social change through participatory programming, I was excited beyond measure. As I perused the program and themes my excitement grew: citizenship learning! participatory democracy! transformative education! popular education! critical thinking! And, a whole segment devoted to Freire - whose books featured prominently on my ‘to-read’ list. Here, was finally an opportunity for me to learn with other engaged people about all of these ideas that impacted my work everyday – in a transformative fashion no less. I booked my train ticket to Toronto on the spot.

Over the first two days of the conference I attended keynote after keynote, panel after panel, listened to speakers and watched PowerPoint presentations. I ate my lunch alone or made awkward small-talk at coffee breaks. As the conference progressed, I felt isolated and grew more and more anxious. I frankly did not understand most of the content, presented in a voluble fashion, nor the protracted ‘clarification’ questions. I felt as though I was simply not smart or educated enough to be there. On day three, I couldn’t muster the energy to attend, and chose instead to go for brunch with the friend who had lent me her couch while I was in Toronto.

What I did not know at the time was that this kind of format (keynote, panel, speaker, powerpoint, repeat) is pretty much standard fare at conferences. I evoke this experience (which I later dubbed “the least transformative experience of my life”) because it has always stood out to me as the epitome of a missed opportunity: to have hundreds of intelligent, capable, informed participants and resource people come hear and speak about transformative learning instead of actually engaging in it. I sensed that most were there to speak about what they *knew*, not about

what they could *learn*. The conference was, in my view, very much about the *study* of transforming others, not the *possibility* of transforming ourselves.

I wondered: was it not possible to address serious issues with rigour and substance and still be human and kind and welcoming to each other? Wasn't the whole point of getting together to share information on significant problems to be able to learn how to best address them in our own realities?

I didn't have to search very far for the answer to my questions as I worked at the Institute in Management and Community Development at Concordia University (referred to as the Institute) - and this was the kind of work we did everyday. The Institute described its work, and over time I described mine (and still do), as 'creating spaces'. Over its two decades of existence, the Institute created a number of programs that gathered upwards of ten thousand activists, community workers, funders, decision-makers, and volunteers alongside university students, faculty, staff, and administrators in 'spaces' that fostered individual and collective learning, reflection, and exchange on issues of social and economic justice. The whole point of all our programming was to create a respite in people's work, lives, and activism, to learn together so that they could return to their communities refreshed and reinvigorated to do the hard work of shifting difficult conditions. Our approach was thoughtful, conscientious, welcoming, and warm. Which was why my experience at OISE had been such a shock - I knew there was a better way. It has now been nine years since the last edition of our 'Summer Program' and I still get stopped on the street by former participants who reminisce with regret as to how useful, and indeed transformative, that space had been to them and to their communities.

### **Encountering the Art of Hosting: Experiencing admiration, affirmation, and impatience**

Fast forward nearly a decade after the OISE conference, and I am staring at my computer screen, reading an email inviting me to attend an Art of Hosting training in Montreal in early 2013. While I understood the Art of Hosting would not be an academic conference such as I had previously experienced, I assumed it would follow the kind of learning I associated with attending a training: a set curriculum with learning objectives, expert facilitators accompanied by PowerPoint presentations; followed by participatory workshops to try out what we learned. I also

assumed there would be some kind of certification or attestation following my (successful) participation. This view and expectation of the Art of Hosting is not uncommon; Nagel (2015) reports that “most people come to an Art of Hosting training thinking it will be a three-day training in holding successful meetings or group conversations” (p. 41).

The Art of Hosting is predicated on the notion that systems only change if all of the people in the system participate in reflecting upon and creating change, and, that it is essential for people to learn to recognize and value their own knowledge and experience (Art of [Inter]Action Manual, p. 4). This is done through the practice of conversation and dialogue, which allow for a shared clarity to emerge (Art of [Inter]Action Manual, p. 5). The claim is that the Art of Hosting is a “response to a world that is becoming increasingly complex and fragmented, where true solutions and innovations lie not in one leader or one viewpoint, but in the bigger picture of our collective intelligence” (Art of [Inter]Action Manual, p. 4).

I was just beginning to emerge from a period of deep mourning. A few months prior I had lost my moorings when the Institute had been closed: I had been rooted there for nearly fourteen years. I was still grieving the loss of the Institute’s dynamic and life-affirming role in Montreal’s community sector, and still quietly raging against the ‘administrative decision’ to close an entire department that had so often been held up as a shining example of innovation and community-building. My anguish over the Institute’s closing was not, for the most part, related to my losing my job (though I loved it), as I had been contemplating moving on to new projects. It was a reaction to the closing of a place and space that had nourished the work and engagement of thousands upon thousands of people in Montreal (and beyond) through meaningful conversation and peer-to-peer exchange for almost twenty years.

Making the decision to attend the first Art of Hosting training in Montreal had been a tough one. I knew a *lot* of people in Montreal’s community sector and I feared that I would spend three days answering questions about the Institute and being confronted by my own grief. Yet, I felt it was an important, low-risk commitment to help me start figuring out the next step of my professional path.

On a frigid January day in early 2013, I gingerly made my way up an icy path through Parc Lafontaine towards (what I was hoping was) the venue for Montreal's first Art of Hosting training. I hobbled up the frozen, slippery walkway, around the building, and through the front door, relieved that this was indeed the right place. I was warmly greeted, told where to put my jacket and iced-up boots, given a sticker to make into a nametag and directed towards a counter of hot coffee and tea, fresh fruit, and miniature croissants. While I had assumed that I would know many, if not most of the people who would attend, I was surprised to realize that I didn't. Not recognizing the other participants in the room felt both destabilizing and liberating as I prepared myself to be fully present for the learning that awaited me.

As I gratefully headed for the coffee I took in the large double circle of chairs, benches and cushions; the beginnings of hand-drawn murals obviously waiting for content; pots of coloured markers, piles of flip-chart sheets, and loads of blank post-it notes of many colours and shapes. On a table off to the side were coil-bound booklets in both English and French offering an overview of the Art of Hosting, its core practices, and theoretical frameworks: booklets that participants were invited to take – or not. Glaringly absent was a schedule, an agenda, a podium, a powerpoint screen, textbooks, guidebooks, participant kits, work stations, rows of chairs...

When the event started, I sat in circle with well over one hundred others (and a few familiar faces after all) seated on chairs, on benches, on cushions, and on the floor, I was acutely aware of my emotional discomfort and the history I was carrying into this training with me. As I looked at the faces around the room I tried to read on them all of the different stories and histories each person was carrying in.

Over the course of the three days, we were 'hosted' through dialogical methods designed to foster conversation and bring participants' stories and experience to the surface. We were also invited to 'harvest' what we heard and what we learned through taking notes, drawing, photos, videos, or any other way we saw fit – individually or collectively. Beyond training, the intention of the event was to create a Montreal-based Art of Hosting community for facilitators, and promote the use of conversational practices within organizations and institutions (Art of [Inter]action Manual, p. 25). It was the result of a *cri du coeur* from Samantha Slade, local

facilitator and entrepreneur, during Quebec's famed *printemps érable*<sup>1</sup> (Art of (Inter)action Manual, p. 25).

As Samantha Slade expressed so eloquently in her welcoming remarks at the event: she had felt enthralled by the willingness of the students to strike and counter forces they felt to be unjust, inspired by their actions, enraged by a feeling of powerlessness over the brutal response by police and politicians, and discouraged by the lack of a society-wide 'conversation' on the issues that were shaking the province. Her response was to do what she, as a professional facilitator, knew best: create a space where the skills and methods for convening such conversations could be learned by local citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Over the three days, I repeatedly found myself vacillating between three reactions: admiration, affirmation, and impatience. I was hugely impressed by the explicit way in which the lead facilitators (known in this context as 'hosts') had 'flattened' the process so that it was near impossible to distinguish participants from organizers from facilitators. There was no trace of the 'sage on the stage' mentality that I had long been opposed to (and railed against during my OISE experience), and work actively to shift in how I engage with others when I am the one holding the mic. The quiet leadership exhibited by the hosts allowed space for other kinds of contributions and leadership to emanate from the participants. I felt affirmed by the language used - language I had often used as shorthand with my colleagues and collaborators at the Institute, as well as by the friendliness of the *accueil* and the warmth of the space: I had long opined that rigorous thinking and meaningful work did not need to happen in a sterile environment.

My impatience stemmed from discussions with other participants who, enthralled with the methods, gushed about how the Art of Hosting was so new, cutting-edge and innovative. I had enough experience organizing and participating in events to know that it wasn't using a

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<sup>1</sup> The *printemps érable* (the maple spring) is nickname given to massive strikes by Quebec's university students (protesting planned tuition hikes) that shook Montreal and much of the province of Quebec in the spring of 2012. It is a play on the *printemps arabe* or the "Arab spring" which was the name given to the numerous protests and demonstrations in the Arab world in the spring of 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from memory and validated by email with Samantha Slade on July 31, 2013.

specific method that ‘made’ an event good, it was the care and consideration on so many levels that invited participants to engage in a way that was meaningful to them. And, that engagement stemmed from so many factors, of which the chosen method to facilitate was just one.

While some focused on the methods being applied and found them innovative, I was drawn to the ‘space’ that was being created which invited participants in as whole people, along with their stories, lived experience, and expertise. What I was seeing at this Art of Hosting event was an awareness and consideration of these different factors way beyond the methods used. “This isn’t new!” the impatience in me burbled, “This is very, very old! This kind of work happens in Montreal every day. It happens just down the street. It happens across the world. *Every day.*” I knew that in Montreal there were dozens of skilled facilitators – in my network alone – that work this way: they care for how participants show up, they create space for a whole person’s experience, they foster meaningful conversation, and they exhibit quiet but powerful leadership that allows for others to step up, and propel forward some serious social change. They just don’t call it “Art of Hosting”.

Does the appellation matter? For the purpose of being able to google a term, find helpful resources, and connect with others : yes. For the purpose of my current research: yes. For the purpose of working with groups in thoughtful, considerate ways that invite people to bring in the best of who they are, so that we may shift towards a more just and equitable world? Absolutely not.

My previous work at the Institute had been to support the individuals and organizations working for social and economic justice through creating spaces for meaningful exchange. Hawken (2007) states: “people don’t know they count in such a malordered, destabilized world, don’t know they are of value. A healthy global civilization cannot be constructed without building blocks of meaning, which are hewn of rights and respect.” What I found within the Art of Hosting was one manifestation of this work predicated on ensuring that the individuals who participated knew that they counted, that they were of value, and that the understanding of the world they carried inside themselves could find a place and rest alongside the understandings of others, and that what was shared would emerge naturally, and hopefully create new possibility.

## Engaging in Intentional Conversation

Petrella (2004) notes that the notion of the common good is losing relevancy for many people, as we live in a time where the value of our very existence has been reduced to what is marketable, while our capacity to imagine a different kind of world is being diminished. Hawken (2007) states: “people don’t know they count in such a malordered, destabilized world, don’t know they are of value.” (p. 23). How can this state of affairs *not* be paralyzing and disempowering? How can we feel that we have the capacity, the motivation, and the possibility to act? How can we possibly move from a sense of disempowerment, from an unconscious participation in dominant power structures that render our times “complex and challenging” (Hassan, 2014, p. X), to a critically conscious, and engaged view of the world?

I have long had an interest in understanding this ‘moment’<sup>3</sup>: How an individual goes from seeing their place in the world as bleak and unchangeable to recognizing that they do have a certain amount of power and agency to affect change. When I reflect on this ‘moment’ in my own life, I am confronted with the knowledge that it was not an idea, author, social movement, or even special mentor that shaped my current thinking, it was the constant act of being in dialogue and conversation with others. As a result, reflecting on societal concerns, and critically thinking about issues of social and economic justice, have become deeply ingrained habits for me.

I estimate that I have invested well over ten thousand hours whether planning for, speaking of, writing about, reflecting on, answering questions concerning, or engaging in planned, intentional conversations<sup>4</sup>. During that time, I have discovered that there are indeed almost as many ways to host a conversation as there are events called conversations – or dialogues. Specifically, I have noticed two common themes emerging in my work, in the literature I lean on to continue learning, and in the work of other practitioners whose paths I cross: an attempt to break the traditional binary of expert/non-expert or teacher/learner; and a desire to use a more participatory format for events that foster inclusiveness and give place and

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<sup>3</sup> I use quotes as I recognize that this probably does not refer to a specific moment, but most likely a process of slow realization.

<sup>4</sup> I purposely call any moderated, facilitated, planned, or otherwise designed, dialogue or conversation ‘intentional’ as to differentiate them from casual or ‘accidental’ conversations.

space to many different voices. In short, a tendency towards egalitarian intentional conversations in lieu of traditional expert-driven formats.

For my part I became fascinated with what was happening beneath the surface of the numerous intentional conversations I have been part of: I noticed that for many individual participants, the very act of engaging in intentional conversation provided an experience where they not only learned something factual or theoretical about the subject matter discussed, they were also put in a position where they had to figure out how to learn with others, how to ask a question, how to state an opinion, how to challenge a belief, how to stay silent, how to suspend judgment, how to listen attentively, how to challenge unjust authority, how to summon the courage to phrase out loud an unarticulated thought, how to name their vision. In short, I surmise that engaging in intentional conversations indirectly teaches individuals the very skills they need to meaningfully participate in a democratic society.

Again and again, I have witnessed conversations amble from “Hey, this is an interesting issue!” to “What can be done about this issue?” or “How can we, as a society, handle this better?” back to “What can I do/change/shift in my own thinking and actions?” My experience has led me to believe that engaging in intentional conversations provides an experience for participants to identify the kind of world, society, community, neighbourhood, and/or family they want to belong to, and collectively imagine the paths, and pinpoint the obstacles, to achieving this ideal.

I have found that many ‘ordinary’ folk (myself included) feel ill-equipped to formulate an opinion on issues of public concern, and as a result, disengage from even discussing them in a critical way, often because the spaces to do so are rare, and perhaps even intimidating - not to mention that the issues we are facing as a society are incredibly complex. Instead, we borrow our views from the media and leave it to the ‘experts’ to figure things out and make decisions that ultimately affect all of us. My view, and the notion that drives my constant and continuous preoccupation with conversation-based practices, is that intentional conversations provide not only a space where different questions can be discussed, but also the opportunity to acquire a

‘habit’ of conversing about tough issues together, and ultimately an impetus to name the world we want and work towards achieving it.

### **Recognizing Freire’s invisible legacy**

My drive to understand and name what I was witnessing in the practice of intentional conversations led me to the *incontournable* work of Paulo Freire. Other than a few quotable quotes I had come across over the years, I had not read Freire until I entered graduate school, well into my thirties. Yet, his words were nothing if not familiar to me. While I had to get used to Freire’s tone, his roundabout way of making a point, and familiarize myself with the literacy-based context of his work in Brazil, very few surprises were waiting for me in the crisp pages of my newly-acquired copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

I had been unknowingly marinating in Freire’s ideas for years: having spent the better part of a decade engaged in dialogue with colleagues at the Institute who had been through their own ‘moment’ as activists and radical educators in the late 60s, the 70s, and the 80s. Passages such as this, summed up the thinking I had been trying to work through for years:

If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. (Freire, 2000, p. 88).

The notion that dialogue (or intentional conversation) is an “existential necessity” resonates with me to my very core: being able *to* dialogue can be viewed as a pre-requisite to meaningfully participate in my family, in my workplace, in resolving issues that affect my community, in addressing complex problems that affect my society - or indeed, the world.

As I attended my first Art of Hosting in 2013, I was reminded of this idea of dialogue as “existential necessity” and I could not help but be reminded of some other elements of Paulo Freire’s pedagogical theories as well. Certain aspects of the Art of Hosting’s approach seemed especially Freirean to me:

- An ‘equalizing’ of relationships that moves away from traditional roles of teacher and student, or, leader and led (Freire, 2000, p. 93; Art of [Inter]action Manual, p. 4). This was exemplified in the use of the words ‘host’ and ‘hosting’ to not only define what would traditionally be called workshop leaders, but equally applied to

participants, who were called upon to ‘host themselves’ and ‘host others’ during the three days.

- An emphasis on appreciating, acknowledging individual experiences and stories as relevant, and incorporating them into an understanding of a broader context (Freire, 2000, p. 96; Art of [Inter]action Manual, p. 5). For example, participants were asked to reflect on their own experience with the *printemps érable* as a way of anchoring the conversation on envisioning what an ideal Quebec could look like.
- An understanding that there are no easy solutions to the problems that affect communities, but that appropriate responses must emerge from those involved (Freire, 2000, p. 84-85). It was often repeated over the three days that the ‘real work’ would only begin when participants returned to their respective communities and worked with others to reflect upon, and develop measures to address related problems together.
- An assumption that all individuals have an equal right to create or co-create the world we live in (Freire, 2000, p. 88; Art of [Inter]action Manual, p. 4), as opposed to change being done to, or imposed upon, people. This was not explicitly stated or addressed at the event but was strongly implied in the dynamics that were created and the kinds of questions participants were invited to ponder.
- Most importantly I was struck by the parallels between how Art of Hosting practitioners used ‘conversation’ and Freire’s use of ‘dialogue’ as the preferred means of action when engaging individuals in any kind of change work. While transforming systems of oppression is the mainstay of Freirean pedagogy, the Art of Hosting’s change work varies considerably depending on the setting, ranging from simple organizational issues to complex society-wide problems of social and economic inequity.

Surprisingly enough, as I later found out while discussing my reflections with a few different Art of Hosting practitioners, most did not seem to recognize, or even be aware of, the

potential parallels between their work and Freirean educational theory. In fact, few had ever heard of Freire, and fewer still had read and were familiar with his work.

### **Investigating assumptions**

As I contemplated the similarities I saw between the Art of Hosting and Paolo Freire's work I wondered whether, upon closer scrutiny, these connections would actually hold up. I decided to examine whether Art of Hosting's use of conversation as a core practice reflects, and implicitly draws upon, Freirean principles of dialogue, or, if my presumptions on this matter were unfounded. My intention was ultimately to reflect on how Art of Hosting practitioners could possibly reframe and deepen their conversational practice by viewing their work through a Freirean lens.

At my proposal defence for this thesis, one of the professors on my committee commented that my writing about the Art of Hosting was very 'loosey-goosey'. My diffident response had been that it was, in fact, the Art of Hosting that was 'loosey-goosey' not necessarily my writing about it. I had no idea how accurate that statement would be.

As I advanced in my research I continuously read and re-read Freire, interviewed six 'stewards' of the Art of Hosting practice, and attended a second Montreal-based Art of Hosting training, a *Beyond the Basics* session in Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia, and joined the hosting team for the *Art of Commoning* (an Art of Hosting event focused on the commons). I started to piece together a very different perspective of what the Art of Hosting is (or is not). I struggled to pinpoint a concise, workable definition of the Art of Hosting, or a repertoire of consistent practices that I could assess for their Freirean attributes. Yet, trying to get a firm grasp of the Art of Hosting was like trying to grab onto the metaphorical bar of wet soap: the more I tried, the more it eluded me.

In each of my interviews for this research I asked the question: "Can you explain very briefly what Art of Hosting is?". It was in my interview with Samantha Slade that the understanding finally clicked into place that the Art of Hosting is not a 'thing', and that I would need to broaden my thinking if I were ever to write intelligently about it:

Huh. Wow. [long pause] I guess. I mean it can change any minute of the day that you would ask me this, right? So.... it's about.... doing.... work for common good. So I put the work first. From a place of consciousness. [pause] I think that's the first time I ever explained it like that. For that. For me, in the end that's what it boils down to for me: doing work for the common good from a place of consciousness. And.... I mean Art of Hosting as a practice, as a framework, as a community, as a person. [pause] Step in and step up. [long pause] We help each other more step in and step up. There you go.

In *Blessed Unrest*, Hawken (2007) speaks of a movement that has no name. A global movement that is “dispersed, inchoate, and fiercely independent” (p. 3) of over two million organizations, large and small, working towards ecological sustainability and social justice. “As I counted the vast number of organizations” writes Hawken (p. 3), “it crossed my mind that perhaps I was witnessing the growth of something organic, if not biologic. Rather than a movement in the conventional sense could it be an instinctive, collective response to threat?”

I suggest that the Art of Hosting – sometimes called the Art of Participatory Leadership – is akin to this movement that has no name. Except it *has* given itself a name so that people may find each other, connect their experiences, and learn together. I have realized, to my surprise, in my many conversations over the past three years that once people do find each other the name takes on less and less importance while the connecting and learning together takes on more. And, like Hawken’s movement it is growing organically without a clear centre that defines its direction. I also understand it as an instinctive, collective response - in this case to addressing the overwhelming complexity of the issues our world is immersed in.

Eventually, it became quite clear to me that I had to circle back to what was of interest to me in this project: What does Freire mean to me? What does the Art of Hosting mean to me? What drew me to attend my first Art of Hosting was the possibility of a mooring while I was navigating a profound and turbulent transition. What I carried into that training, what I carried out, what I still carry today has remained steadfast: a belief in dialogue as “existential necessity”.

In the following pages, I offer my own, very personal, understanding of Paulo Freire’s work, of the Art of Hosting’s approach, and of how the two intersect in my own thinking and practice. In Chapter One, I present an overview of Freirean dialogical theory, and the corresponding requirements outlined for dialogue. In Chapter Two, I offer an interpretation of the

Art of Hosting as a rallying point for practitioners the world over who share similar underlying assumptions about their work in relation to the state of the world. In Chapter Three, I share the main themes that emerged from the interviews I conducted with six self-identifying Art of Hosting practitioners. In Chapter Four, I explore how soaking in Freire's ideas, and connecting with the Art of Hosting community, over the past three years has influenced my own understanding of dialogue and my practice as a facilitator.

## Chapter One: Paulo Freire and the ever-evolving art of humanizing

### Introduction

In this chapter I have primarily interacted with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and some of his other original texts in the form of English-language translations. My focus is the element of dialogue in Freire's work. To elaborate on my own internal reflection on Freire's work, I also refer to the work of Brian Murphy, writer and activist thinker, who shares an affinity with Freire - and indeed wrote the first Canadian thesis on him back in 1973 - in his reflections and actions toward a more just world in which we all can attain the realization of our humanity.

This chapter approaches Freire from three distinct perspectives. In the first part I focus my attention on situating Freire, his work and his thinking, in the world today as it pertains to working towards (positive and progressive) social change. In the second part, I shift my attention towards understanding his conception of dialogue through the prism of personal experience – my own – and how dialogue led me to become critically conscious of (some of) the external forces that shaped both my world and worldview. Finally, I delve into specific aspects of Freirean thought that I find especially relevant (as outlined in the introduction) to establishing the necessary conditions for dialogue, which I call 1) Flat relationships; 2) Nothing about us without us; and 3) Everyone gets to name the world for themselves.

### Freire beyond the “-isms”

Freire has been designated as both a broad-thinking citizen of the world (Torres, 1998, p. 1), and the product of a distinct time and place (Mollin, 2012). His thinking and ideas are regularly corralled and claimed by multiple (and sometimes contradictory) camps (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 10-11, 172; Torres, 1998), while his approach to learning and transmitting ideas was distinctly transdisciplinary (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 16). Freire rejected the many labels apposed to him: "I didn't invent a method, or a theory, or a program, or a system, or a pedagogy, or a philosophy. It is people who put names to things" (Torres, 1998).

I understand the need to divide knowledge into categories (Hess & Ostrom, 2007, p. 3), to label and distill something to its barest essence – after all this is what theses, dissertations, and

academic disciplines are based upon! Yet I can't help but think that we are perhaps doing Freire a disservice when we try to delineate his ideas too strictly. Could he not simply be seen, as he preferred (Torres, 1998), as a thinker on education, *en général*? Or, as a public intellectual (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 8) who made important contributions to the knowledge commons? Hess and Ostrom (2007) argue that “the more people who share useful knowledge, the greater the common good” (p. 5) and suggest that understanding knowledge as a shared resource, circumvents the restrictive view of ideas as private property, since:

Knowledge, in its intangible form, fell into the category of a public good since it was difficult to exclude people from knowledge once someone had made a discovery. One person's use of knowledge (such as Einstein's theory of relativity) did not subtract from another person's capacity to use it. This example refers to the ideas, thoughts, and wisdom found in the reading of a book—not to the book itself, which would be classified as a private good (p. 9).

When *Pedagogy of Autonomy*, Freire's last book, was published in 1997, he convinced his publishers to sell it at a very low price so that it would be accessible to schoolteachers in Brazil: 30,000 copies sold out within just a few days (Torres, 1998). Perhaps he simply wanted his work to be affordable. Or, perhaps he wanted the “ideas, thoughts, and wisdom” to live beyond the pages and in the hearts and actions of people – foreshadowing the paradigm of open knowledge creation and sharing towards which we are currently transitioning (Hess and Ostrom, 2007, p. 21). Nowadays, a Creative Commons License (such as what I have affixed to this work) allows and encourages others to “remix, tweak, and build upon” ideas – a concept that I believe Freire would revel in: an open source version of the intellectual world.

Freire never assumed or expected, but rather vocally opposed, the notion that those who found inspiration or mentorship in his work would, or should, simply ingest and regurgitate his ideas (Macedo, 2004, p. xxiii; Schugurensky, 2011, p. 113). Those who learned directly from him were also not afraid to criticize his ideas (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 6) but walked with him, and learned from him, and “as per his request, after his death his ideas are being “reinvented,” and this includes not only theoretical discussions and debates, but also practical issues related to the implementation of a variety of projects and programs around the world” (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 113). As Hess and Ostrom (2007) so eloquently state: “the discovery of future

knowledge is a common good and a treasure we owe to future generations. The challenge of today's generation is to keep the pathways to discovery open (p. 8).

In, *The Million Paulo Freires*, one of the many pieces published around the world following Freire's death in 1997 (Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 291; Schugurensky, 2011, p. 115), Rosa Maria Torres (1998) drew on her earlier interviews with him to paint the portrait of a man devoted to the task of becoming more fully human:

Mystified and demonized when he was just beginning, too easily and too rapidly converted into a theory and into a method, apologists and critics denied him the right to err and to rectify, to advance and to perfect, to continue developing his thoughts, as each person must be allowed, as is required by any serious and honest intellectual.

“Is it time to shelve Paulo Freire?” is the provocative question I encountered in the opening pages of the *Journal of Thought's* issue dedicated to exploring the continued application and relevancy of Freire's ideas. While the authors reckoned that his perspective still has a lot to offer, and is, in fact extremely relevant to social change work (Simpson & McMillan, 2008, p. 5) they did not shy away from examining some of the many ways in which Freire's work is skewed:

Some reject him because he is not seen as a thorough going Marxist, a militant feminist, an orthodox Catholic, or a militaristic revolutionist. Others claim his theoretical orientation is shallow, e.g., his epistemology is suspect, his ethical theory is inadequate, and his social philosophy is unbalanced. Still others critique his views of teachers as cultural workers and administrators as strong leaders as being inconsistent with his liberatory philosophy. Even others reject Freire because they think his ideas are irrelevant to transnational and global issues and are hopelessly embedded in a Brazilian meta-narrative. And others seem charred by his radical and uncompromising love, a love that seeks to humanize even the dehumanizer. (pp. 3-4)

The concluding paragraphs of a UNESCO-sponsored biography of Freire (Gerhardt, 1993) suggest that common criticisms of Freire's work stem from a “sense that he has developed only those parts of his theory that are relevant to the social situation in which he was working” and that he lacks a “fully developed sociology of, or philosophy of, education”(p. 12). He attributes the “mystique” surrounding Freire's work to his exile and natural charisma while bemoaning that “it neither possesses a solid theoretical framework nor was it ever carried out and

evaluated in a way that would allow for objective confirmation” (p. 12). He then goes on to suggest that Freire (who was still alive at the time of this publication) should “formulate his institutional critique and analysis of the ways in which dominant and oppressive ideologies are embedded in the rules, procedures and traditions of institutions and systems. In so doing, he should remain the utopian he is” (p. 12).

This depiction of the “utopian” Freire (in a UNESCO sponsored “Thinkers on Education” series, no less) dutifully formulating an institutional critique of rules and procedures – because he *should*, is a telling indicator of just how much his work was “mystified by some, demonized by others, misunderstood by many” (Torres, 1998). The sheer volume of ink that has been spilled (or keys tapped) in the quest to understand (or undermine) Freire’s work begets a high probability factor that it will indeed be interpreted in multifarious ways (Macedo, 2004, p. xvi; Schugurensky, 2011, p. 112).

In a recent correspondence, author and activist Brian Murphy, through whom I first discovered Freire’s thinking, assured me:

You are also correct that Freire was constantly amending and self-correcting. I had an exchange of letters with the man himself when I was doing my thesis in the early 70s (he was working with UNESCO at the time, based in Paris) to clarify some apparent ‘contradictions’ (contradictions that concerned my UoO thesis committee much more than me!), which he was pleased to do; he seemed to assume that contradiction (and transcending contradiction) was implicit to the entire epistemological process he was exploring.

In the very preface of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) Freire writes: “Continued observation will afford me an opportunity to modify or corroborate in later studies the points proposed in this introductory work.” (p. 37). Later, he invites this criticality from his readers as well: “I will be satisfied if among the readers of this work there are those sufficiently critical to correct mistakes and misunderstandings, to deepen affirmations and to point out aspects I have not perceived.” (p. 39)

Freire himself never claimed that he had created any “methods” or even elaborated a pedagogy, but that his contribution was merely an ever-evolving critique and analysis of education (Torres, 1998). He readily admitted the imperfection of his thought and simply

claimed “the right to continue thinking, learning and living beyond his books” (Torres, 1998). Further, he demanded this of others as well (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 196).

While Freire may be difficult to classify (Morrow & Torres, 2002, p. ix), if he must be labeled with an “-ism” then Murphy’s definition of humanist<sup>5</sup> radicalism<sup>6</sup> may best apply as it is “dedication to dialogue and mutuality, to shared vision, decision, and action, because that is healthy and effective. To impose is to negate the human; to accept, dialogue, assert, accommodate, assimilate, share is to actualize and affirm humanness” (Murphy, 1999, p. 35).

### **Applying Freire today**

For all of my affinity with Freirean thinking it is quite clear that the articulation of his pedagogy was a response to a very specific time (mid-twentieth century), and place (Brazil), and a particular context (literacy work with the marginalized) (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 77). I was certainly not the demographic Freire had in mind with his writing. As such it is only fair and just to ask: Is Freire’s work relevant to the time (21<sup>st</sup> century), place (Montreal and more broadly North America), and context (approaches to group facilitation) I am inquiring about? Is the Art of Hosting a suitable subject matter to study from a Freirean perspective if it does not directly address issues of oppression?

It may be strikingly obvious that a crowd of primarily white, educated Montrealers - however engaged - paying out more than \$500 per person to enjoy a three-day conversational retreat in the form of an Art of Hosting training does not fit the Freireian representation of the oppressed – no matter what kind of good, justice-oriented work these people might be returning to; this was far from a situation of poverty or of domination to transform.

The crux of the matter is that our society is still far from just, equitable or egalitarian (Hassan, 2014; Hawken, 2007; Murphy, 1999; van Gelder, 2011) and the who’s who of it is not easy to untangle. I turn the question upon myself: Am I oppressor (white, straight, cisgendered, able-bodied, North American, educated)? Am I oppressed (female, French-Canadian/Anglo-

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<sup>5</sup> to be distinguished from humanitarianism which “maintains and embodies oppression” – (Macedo, 2004, p. xxii)

<sup>6</sup> Schugurensky (2011) uses the term “radical democratic humanism” (p. 205) in the same sense and spirit.

québécoise, mother of a mixed-race family, working class background, temporarily low income)? This line of questioning is frustratingly nebulous as applying the oppressor/oppressed polarity to modern issues, questions of identity, and relationships may be the equivalent of playing philosophical Whack-A-Mole. A recurrent criticism is the use of polarities in Freire's work notably that the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy is simplistic, reductive, and vague (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 134-135). Yet, for Freire, clearly *both* the oppressor and the oppressed are marked by dehumanization ("a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (Freire, 2000, p. 44)), because to oppress is *also* to lose one's humanity (Freire, 2000, p. 44).

Whether I (or the people that inspired this line of inquiry) am oppressed, oppressor, or an oppressed/oppressor mash-up, does little to change the central assertion of Freire's work that dialogical learning is key to the *conscientização* of those dehumanized by the alienation and domination found in the structure and values of a fundamentally inequitable society (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 205).

And it is this process of *conscientização* or *conscientisation* or 'critical consciousness' that is the *raison d'être* of dialogue and problem-posing education (Macedo, 2000) p. 12). Freire (2000) terms it "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (p. 35)." Cruz (2015) highlights that "the concept clearly entails both the process of reaching critical awareness and the action upon this realization which leads to a transformation of the conditions that are at the root of oppression (p. 173)." Lest the notion of critical consciousness remain abstract and theoretical, let us reflect for a moment on the stakes for an individual human being when their critical consciousness is simply not engaged:

A poor woman was telling me about her problems and difficulties, of how great an affliction she was suffering. I felt impotent. I did not know what to say. I felt indignation for what she was going through. In the end, I asked her: "Are you American?"

"No," she replied, "I am poor." It was as if what was uppermost in her mind was her sense of being a failure. And that was her own fault. Something she almost had to ask pardon for from the society that was part of, namely, North America. I can still see her blue eyes full of tears, tears of suffering and self-blame for having been a personal failure. People like her are part of a legion of wounded and marginalized who have not

yet understood that the cause of their suffering is the perversity of the socio-political and economic system under which they live. As long as they think like this, they simply reinforce the power of this system. In fact, they connive, unconsciously with a de-humanizing socio-political order. (Freire, 1998, p. 78)

Yet, it is important to not gloss over the reality that the stakes are incredibly different for a person living under the strain of systemic subjugation and a person attending a training session for personal or professional development. Even well-meaning solidarity or the sense of being an ally does not rectify (or even begin to address) this level of inequity, and can easily slip into the abyss of “false generosity,” which are charitable acts that, while they reassure the giver, do little more than reinforce the power dynamics of inequity (Freire, 2000, p. 45). Further, as van Gorder (2008) points out, much of the oppression in North America is indirect (a far cry from some of the peasant worker/foreman dynamics described by Freire) and the privileged are educated to be concerned for the less-privileged and engage in charitable endeavours, which essentially reinforce “religious, political and educational structures offer paternalistic solutions that raise the oppressor’s self-esteem while, at the same time, forcing the oppressed into even greater dependence on their so-called assistance” (*Conscientizacao as a Force for Liberating Education*, para. 8).

Freirean analysis, however, goes beyond a particular individual’s ‘oppression metric’ as it is essentially about a collective endeavour (Schugurensky, 2011; van Gelder, 2011). Freire’s concepts merit being applied to any conversation or initiative that has at its core a concern for people’s humanity and shifting towards a more healthy and whole world as it is essential that “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation” (Freire, 2000, p. 83). Or, as Freire (2004) stated in reaction to being told his call for dialogue across classes and ethnicities was ‘white talk’: “The only person who can’t do this kind of talk is somebody whose self-interest would be served by the maintenance of the status quo” (p. 134).

## Unraveling the why

No one goes anywhere alone, least of all into exile – not even those who arrive physically alone, unaccompanied by family, spouse, children, parents, or siblings. No one leaves his or her world without having been transfixed by its roots, or with a vacuum for a soul. We carry with us the memory of many fabrics, a self soaked in our history, our culture; a memory, sometimes scattered, sometimes sharp and clear, of the streets of our childhood, of our adolescence; the reminiscence of something distant that suddenly stands out before us, in us, a shy gesture, an open hand, a smile lost in a time of misunderstanding, a sentence, a simple sentence possibly now forgotten by the one who said it. A word for so long a time attempted and never spoken, always stifled in inhibition, in the fear of being rejected – which, as it implies a lack of confidence in ourselves, also means refusal of risk. (Freire, 2004, p. 24)

This learning journey I have undertaken to better understand Freire’s work is a highly personal one, anchored in my own lived experience, my lifelong interest in justice, and my concern over approaching my own facilitation work in a manner that has both integrity and care for the wholeness of the humans I am working with. Perhaps one of the reasons I resonate with Freire’s ideas is that, like him, (Macedo, 2000, p. 13) I do not divorce my intellectual capacity from my own being as I learn, but rather use my experience as a platform from which to work out theory (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 8). As stated earlier, reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* held few surprises for me, rather, as Freire (2004) experienced when he read the *Wretched of the Earth*, it offered “the satisfying sensation with which we are taken when we find a confirmation of the “why” of the certitude we find within ourselves” (p. 122).

In *Pedagogy of Hope* (2004) Freire recounts his struggle to overcome bouts of debilitating depression that would come over him without warning, immobilizing him for days at a time, threatening both his personal and professional life (p. 21). Four years of careful observation of the conditions around him when his symptoms appeared allowed him to decipher that his depression was triggered by the exact same weather patterns he had experienced as a very young child the day his father died. For Freire, unearthing and understanding this link freed him from his depression (p. 22) – a process he equates to that of workers reading their own world (p. 22), of “unraveling the fabric in which the facts are given, discovering their own “why”” (p. 22).

“In problem-posing education,” affirms Freire (2000), “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 64). Reading Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has given me words with which to name previous experiences, and a theoretical framework within which I can situate both my own learning, and integrate and adapt his thinking within my own to anchor my facilitation work.

### **Shifting from Inadequacy to Engagement: A personal experience in dialogue**

*Paulo:* I should like to press you to tell us something about your present experience of being uprooted and having to put down new roots. Tell us a little about being uprooted, about that break with your past, and the subsequent need to put down new roots as an existential affirmation of your new situation.

*Antonio:* Paulo, what you are asking me to do is to tell my whole life story, and all the experiences of my life, both intellectual and emotional, because exile is, as you say, a break with the past, and that break with the past is a negative, on which we must bring another negative to bear in order to achieve a positive result. (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 5).

I was four years old when I first remember inappropriate contact with an older family member. I was eight years old when I accidentally learned my eldest half-sister was to be incarcerated for murder - by stumbling upon an issue of *Allô Police*. I was nine years old when images of starving Ethiopian children burned themselves into my mind. I was twelve years old when I read Alex Haley’s *Roots* cover to cover trying to make sense of slavery and racism. I was thirteen when my half-brother went into rehab the first time (and twenty-one when he committed suicide). I was fourteen when I tried to comprehend why Marc Lepine gunned down fourteen young women at Montreal’s Polytechnique simply because they were women. Most of my childhood was filled with anxiety, agitation, and a sense of impotence at the state of *my* world, and of *the* world. Isolated by the conditions in my family, the geography of my neighbourhood, and my introversion at school, I tried to work through all of this alone, my thoughts doing frantic laps around my own mind.

During my last year of high school I came across a pamphlet from World Vision and took it

upon myself to organize a “30 Hour Famine” – a popular fundraising event targeted at adolescents. Driven by an urgent desire to end world hunger, I funnelled all of my agitation into energy with which to pry myself from my permanent position along the wallflower’s bench. I managed to convince the school principal, a few dozen fellow students, and myself, that forgoing food for 30 hours and spending a night in the school cafeteria was a direct and immediate solution to the world food crisis. We raised lots of money: over \$400. We watched movies, ran around the school after dark, and the principal even splurged for a pizza party after the “famine”. A good time was had by all.

After I elatedly mailed my cheque to World Vision – enough, I thought, to feed many, many starving children in 1992 dollars – I felt a strange sense of disappointment. I had worked *so* hard, had raised *so much* money. Yet, the world didn’t *feel* any different. Maybe, my sixteen year-old self concluded, I had simply not done enough. Obviously, what was required was to involve more people, raise more money – maybe even do more hours of ‘famine’. Then, we could end world hunger. For sure.

I never did another ‘famine’. And for many years I did not get involved in my community. I did not raise money. I did not volunteer. I did not feel adequate.

Freire (2000) states that “when people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole, they cannot truly know that reality” (p. 104). My brief and unsatisfying incursion into action was (despite doing it with others) ultimately a solitary endeavour, and lacked reflection. While, my insular reflections gave me a sense that reality was “dense, impenetrable, and enveloping” (Freire, 2000, p. 105), and I was often overcome with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

I did not understand that there was a political context to the world issues I was concerned about, nor that there were mental health issues in my family, and a socio-economic context to my personal reality. I could not understand that my situation in life (or that of the world) was not an absolute, but rather a situation that had come about for specific reasons, and one that could potentially be transformed (Freire, 2000, p. 104): if I could see a context broader than my own self. Murphy (1999) echoes Herbert Marcuse by affirming the need to “move past the one-

dimensionality of our perceptions – the tendency to see only what is – and promote the second dimension of perception: seeing what is not – and, therefore, what might be” (p. 10).

A little over six years after my ‘famine’ experiment, I found myself nervously seated at a round table in the offices of the Institute in Management and Community Development at Concordia University, waiting for a job interview. I blundered (I felt) my way through questions about community development and social change, nervous and self-conscious that I did not have the right answers (or any answers at all), but desperately wanting this part-time job that dealt with issues I still cared about deeply (Racism! Sexism! Poverty!). I did not understand at the time that so many of my responses starting with “ahhh... well....it depends”, were probably the most appropriate I could have given. Instead, I left feeling I had bombed the interview because I did not have The Answer.

I had no idea that this round table would become an anchoring element of the next fourteen years of my life. For almost a decade, I co-coordinated the Institute’s Summer Program in non-profit management and community development, an annual week of training and reflection for activist citizens and those working in the community sector. And, for another five years, I coordinated its University of the Streets Café program using the ‘public conversation’ as a practice to create gathering places for community members to pursue lifelong learning and citizen engagement.

Through my participation at the Institute I became engaged in a process of naming the world for myself (Freire, 2000, p. 88), meaning-making and assumption-sharing with my colleagues as we developed learning events that supported those working on issues of social and economic justice. In order to create programming I had to act, but for my actions to have meaning and impact I had to reflect with others (Freire, 2000 .p. 88), and for our reflections to resonate in the world, we had to create action – together. In short, I learned about praxis: having my reflection inform my action *and* my action inform my reflection (Freire, 2000, p. 51). I learned to engage in “creative freedom in which each individual is seen as an untested feasibility, a possibility in process, discovering and testing the limits of reality (Murphy, 1999, p. 93).

## **The binds of freedom**

On paper, joining this healthy, trusting, welcoming organizational culture was enthralling. Yet, the reality that I experienced was that when given the opportunity to function within a structure that valued wholeness and assumed I was capable and competent, I felt inadequate and disgruntled. At the Institute, every issue we worked on related to social and economic justice was essentially approached from a problem-posing perspective: *What is at stake here? What are the challenges? What is possible? How can we support those doing this work? What would that support look like?* There was no certainty, no easy answer, nor fast response. Complexity and consideration reigned. I felt inept and overwhelmed: *I just wanted someone to tell me what to do. I wanted someone to give me The Answer.* Freire (2000) considers this reaction to be part of the growing pains associated with the process of engagement:

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed (p. 62).

Murphy (1999) assesses this discomfort with ambiguity as a sense that: “we can no longer count on extrinsic factors to determine our choices and actions. We are not sure of anything, especially of what we want and what we should do” (p.24). Yet, ambiguity, he argues is “an essential element in freedom” (p. 25). Feeling inadequate, disgruntled, inept, and overwhelmed was not a ‘freeing’ situation to be in, nor an empowering or promising place from which to support social justice work. Taking responsibility for my autonomy and being given the opportunity to examine the complexity of issues and formulate my own opinions was causing me great stress.

This mindset is reinforced, by what Bohm (1996) declares to be a culture that sets science on a mission to “get truth” (p. 44). Foley (1999) evokes Foucault’s dire warning about totalizing discourses: “[the] secret, unconscious aspect of discourses means that people can participate in their own subjugation by absorbing the rules of a discourse or by taking something that is

socially constructed as ‘truth’” (p. 16). Or as Schugurensky (2011) succinctly offers as lesson two in his *Twenty lessons I learned from Freire*: “I learned that oppressed people have part of the oppressor within themselves” (p. 4).

Freire (2000) speaks of the duality experienced by the oppressed as they balance their newfound desire for freedom with their fear of living an authentic life propelled by their own will, and not determined by the familiar (and somewhat comforting) structures mounted by the oppressors. The way through, Freire suggests, is to view theirs as a limiting situation that can be transformed rather than a reality from which there is no escape (Freire, 2000, p. 104).

I offer a knowingly personal (and possibly loose) interpretation of Freire’s (2000) notion of internalized oppression. The language of theory is simply inadequate to describe the sense of loss, the disorientation that comes with the realization that our beliefs and assumptions control and bind us. Litterature sometimes offers us a more exact glimpse into understanding our existence. Novelist, Salman Rushdie (1999) renders the disorientation felt by the shedding of oppressive ways of thinking in this way:

Suppose that it’s only when you dare to let go that your real life begins? When you’re whirling free of the mother ship, when you cut your ropes, slip off your chain, step off the map, go absent without leave, scam, vamoose, whatever: suppose that’s it’s then, and only then that you’re actually free to act! To lead the life that nobody tells you how to live, or when, or why. In which nobody orders you to go forth and die for them, or for god, or comes to get you because you broke one of the rules, or because you’re one of those people who are, for reasons which unfortunately you can’t be given, simply not allowed. Suppose you’ve got to go through the feeling of being lost, into the chaos and beyond; you’ve got to accept the loneliness, the wild panic of losing your moorings, the vertiginous terror of the horizon spinning round and round like the edge of a coin tossed in the air. (p. 176)

### **Practicing dialogue, practicing humanity**

Experience is what we do, what we perceive and what happens to us—the internalized incorporation of the cumulative events and actions of our lives, their implications and their consequences. Experience is memory. Experience is knowledge, the most direct and competent knowledge possible. Experience is the ground of our existence. The paradox is that there is often a direct contradiction between our experience and the socialized knowledge and formalized social theory that is the currency of prevailing social and political interaction (Murphy, 2015a, p. 6.)

I cringe when I think back to my participation in certain meetings and conversations at that very round table. Learning to fully engage in dialogue was not an easy task for me. I brought both arrogance and timidity to the table. At times, I thrust my point of view and opinions on others without critical thought, and on other occasions I threw up my hands and abdicated responsibility, willfully not participating, or, withholding potentially useful contributions. I did not know how to act without “roles” and the usual structures of authority I had come to see as “normal”. Freire (2000) offers an apropos example of young professionals experiencing a similar dynamic:

In facing a concrete situation as a problem, the participants begin to realize that if their analysis of the situation goes any deeper they will either have to divest themselves of their myths, or reaffirm them. Divesting themselves of and renouncing their myths represents, at that moment, an act of self-violence. On the other hand, to reaffirm myths is to reveal themselves. The only way out (which functions as a defense mechanism) is to project onto the coordinator their own usual practices: *steering, conquering, and invading*. (P. 157)

Freire (2000) states that “dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and action, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility” (p. 90).

In a similar fashion, an effective dialogue cannot occur if there is timidity and fear (Freire, 2000, p. 89): if a participant constantly downplays or obscures her or his views, opinions, and thoughts, it is obstructive. Instead, confidence, courage, and generosity are in order (p. 90). Freire (2000) calls for shifting “traditional” authoritarian relationships into ones that are more egalitarian recognizing everyone’s learning by teachers becoming students and students becoming teachers.

It was especially useful for me to recognize that although the people I worked with most consistently had significantly more experience than I did and were skilled dialoguers and communicators, they also fumbled. At times, despite their undisputable commitment to “the work,” they also brought arrogance or timidity to the table. One of the key lessons I retained from this is that, no matter the gap in age, experience, and education, I was only one learner

among others (Freire, 2000, p. 80), and that participating in this kind of space could be difficult and demanding for all involved. Yet, in the moments of breakdown and crisis (which were often related to the naming of closely-held assumptions and truths) were also opportunities for transformation. Freire (2000) offers: “Problem-posing education affirms men and women in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality.” (p. 84)

Through my time at the Institute I was able to shed my sense of inadequacy when I took into account how my individual actions served the whole and how the whole made my actions – thereby my growth, my understanding and my engagement – possible (Freire, 2000, p. 99). In essence, I perceived my “limit-situation”, my “untested feasibility” and allowed myself to act upon the world. Schugurensky (2011) renders Freire as such: “by engaging in limit acts people stop passively accepting reality as a “given,” develop a more critical understanding of themselves and in their relations with the world and with others, and increase the belief in their own capacity to change things” (p. 75). The key, however, is surpassing the isolation of individualism in the notion of “with others” – Murphy (1973) reminds us that “the ontological vocation is individual yet collective” (p. 61). I have come to the conclusion that being able to situate myself within an organizational structure dedicated to dialogue in the name of a broader vision of social and economic justice, led me to a deep sense of engagement and possibility.

### **Dialogue: Prescription, practice, or posture?**

No matter how many articles, papers, and books I have read by Freire (or in response and reaction to him), I always find the same thrust to his thinking, which can be summarized in two words: social transformation. Schugurensky (2011) calls it a “political-pedagogical project aimed at humanization” (p. 204), and offers a useful, and I believe, highly applicable, framework to summarize Freire’s approach:

It [is] a political pedagogy predicated on critical reflection and collective transformative action in order to develop more democratic, just, and happier societies. The triangle of transformation, then, embraces: (a) the direction of Freire’s transformative project (humanization), (b) the main social activity to move in that direction (education), and (c) the recognition of the power dynamics and ideological struggles related to the social forces opposing and supporting those changes (politics).

Theorizing about a “political-pedagogical project aimed at humanization” is interesting and relatively straightforward. Yet, *engaging* in such a project is, at best, a challenging and difficult endeavour. However, the mission set out by Freire is, in my interpretation, actually quite simple: to be human with each other while holding the belief that the world can be better than it is now, and, that we can act to make it better by purposefully learning together through meaningful conversation. Perhaps this is a truism: easier said than done. Or, as Gadotti said in reference to the coherence he observed in Freire’s work and being:

Simplicity is one of the most difficult virtues to accomplish because it requires not only wisdom but also the capacity to express complex ideas in clear (but not simplistic) terms, without falling into intellectual arrogance and without using unnecessary jargon (as cited in Schugurensky, 2011, p. 42).

In the introduction to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Donaldo Macedo (2000) reflects on how some present-day educators who claim to use Freirean dialogical approaches, are misguided in their interpretation as they reduce a complex philosophical understanding to techniques, and produce “dialogues” that are more akin to group therapy (p. 18) or a “mechanizing dialogical practice” (p. 16), than the revolutionary approach and transformative aspirations Freire had intended (Macedo, 2004, ,p. xix). In Freire’s (2004) own words:

In order to understand the meaning of dialogical practice, we have to put aside the simplistic understanding of dialogue as a mere technique. Dialogue does not represent a somewhat false path that I attempt to elaborate on and realize in the sense of involving the ingenuity of the other. On the contrary, dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus, in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task. We have to make this point very clear. I engage in dialogue not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing. (p. 379)

Giroux tells us:

Paulo offered no recipes for those who felt in need of instant theoretical and political fixes. I was often amazed at how patient he always was in dealing with people who

wanted him to provide menu-like answers to the problems they raised about education, not realizing that they were almost undermining his insistence that pedagogy is defined by its context and must be approached as a project of individual and social transformation - that it can never be reduced to a method. (as cited in Schugurensky, 2011, pp. 211-212)

### **Identifying pre-conditions for dialogue**

If we are to accept the notion of dialogue as a posture, rather than a method or technique, adopting a dialogical posture coherent with Freire's philosophy must be anchored in the following preconditions:

*Flat relationships:* In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire focuses on how to redefine the relationship between teachers and students (p. 93), but his words are applicable to every dialogical instance: "At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting together, to learn more than they now know" (Freire, 2000, p. 90). Where Freire's thinking gets more complex to apply is in detangling the charity model of "helping" others in the form of false generosity which may be meant to help others but subdues them instead (p. 45). For the past 15 years I have kept a clipping from an old issue of the *Shambhala Sun* that renders this concept quite nicely:

Helping is not a relationship between equals. A helper may see others as weaker than they are, needier than they are, and people often feel this inequality. The danger in helping is that we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity or even wholeness. (Remen, 1999)

*Nothing about us without us:* This slogan is said to have originated in Poland upon the advent of its first democracy and has since been appropriated by manifold groups to "communicate the idea that no policy should be decided by any representative without the full and direct participation of members the group(s) affected by that policy" ("Nothing about us without us", Wikipedia, 2014). Freire (2000) asks: "Who are better than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffers the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation?" (p. 45) Closely tied with the issue of false generosity, the notion of "nothing about us without us"

necessitates undoing the reflexes of doing *to*, doing *for*, or doing on *behalf of* doing and engaging instead in doing *with* (p. 127).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire expands on this point in the context of revolution, specifically how revolutionary leaders must engage with ‘the people’. Again it is a pre-condition to all dialogue, especially as it concerns moving along praxis’s trajectory from reflection to action, and back again. If an issue affects a group of people, then these people are those who need to be at the heart of addressing the issue; appropriate responses must emerge from those involved and their lived experience needs to be recognized as valid expertise. “We cannot say,” continues Freire (2000), “that in the process of revolution someone liberates someone else, nor yet that someone liberates himself, but rather that human beings in communion liberate each other.”

“Heroic global social action”, offers Murphy (publication pending), “is carried out by uncountable persons around this planet who in their own places, their own lives, and their own work—over decades and long lifetimes—envision another future and try to promote it, and share it, and live it day after day” (p. 15). Freire (2000), asserts that

true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking – thinking which discerns *an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them* – thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved (p. 73) [italics mine].

*Everyone gets to name the world for themselves*: At the heart of dialogue is the notion of a verbal exchange between people: individuals discussing issues and ideas out loud. An important element of Freirean thinking is the notion of “naming the world”. “Dialogue,” asserts Freire (2000),

is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming – between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them (p. 88).

Naming the world may seem like an abstract, almost metaphysical concept, but it is, in fact, a concrete and practical undertaking. A personal example: When I was 18 years old, my boyfriend and I walked into a sports store in downtown Montreal. “Don’t do that!” he whispered urgently to me. “Um, what?” I responded. “Take your hands *out* of your pockets!” he instructed. I hesitantly took my hands out of my pockets and asked “Uh, why?” We looked at each other in mutual incomprehension and left the store. “Seriously”, he continued as we walked away. “I can’t believe your parents never taught you this. Never put your hands in your pockets when you’re in a store. That’s obvious!” “Seriously,” I responded, “I don’t get it.” “Because they’ll think your stealing stuff,” he said. “Why would they think that?” I laughed. He was silent for a moment, a long moment. “You’re not black,” he said softly, half to himself, “no one ever taught you this because you’re not black.” “No, I’m not,” I agreed in a half-whisper, saddened by what I finally understood. After leaving the store we continued our conversation for hours. He started piecing together other things he *didn’t* do because he was black. As he told me about these experiences, I started connecting to things that *I* didn’t do because I was a woman.

There are several elements in this example that connect with Freire’s (2000) work: together we were able to 1) name situations we had experienced; 2) identify that we had had very different realities; 3) begin forging a shared understanding of the impact of our differing experiences (p. 96); 4) situate these experiences into a broader societal context; 5) delineate how the societal context impacted our lives (p. 97); 6) recognize that this was an unfortunate, but not a given, reality – a “limit-situation” (p. 99); 7) situate ourselves as agents within our own lives (p. 91) – if we could broaden each *other’s* understanding, where else could we experience this “broadening”? What were our other untested feasibilities”? (p. 102); 8) experience solidarity and co-learning; and finally, 9) through our joint naming of the world we transformed our understanding of it, thereby transforming our experience of it (pp. 87, 88). This was an undertaking that neither of us would have been able to accomplish without the other to dialogue with, or had either of us tried to name or define experiences for the other (pp. 88, 90). Freire (2000) states:

And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one’s person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor

can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants.[...] It is an act of creation ; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another. The domination implicit in dialogue is that of the world by the dialoguers: it is conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind (p. 89).

Murphy (1999) offers a complementary description of this act of dialogue, he refers to it as conspiracy:

The word ‘conspiracy’ comes from Latin words that mean ‘to breathe together’, and combines the notion of mutuality of life with the image of hope. It is dedication to dialogue and mutuality, to shared vision, decision and action, because that is healthy and effective. (p. 36)

In essence, realizing the “political-pedagogical project aimed at humanization” cannot be done by trying to “make it happen” or “just get it done”. In fact, it may never *be* “done”. What I take away in my reading of Freire, and through actively engaging with his ideas is that while I may actively practice dialogue in both my personal and professional life, and may even employ certain “methods” in my facilitation work, dialogue, as per my interpretation of Freire, is not a “thing”; it is not an end unto itself. Dialogue is a means to continually and consistently engage in critical consciousness. As such, Freire’s work goes far beyond the realm of intellectual pondering, it can be interpreted as worldview, a posture, an attitude, an approach to life, a “way of being human” (Freire & Freire, 2007, p ix), or, in his own words a “pedagogy of hope” because:

While I certainly cannot ignore hopelessness as a concrete entity, nor turn a blind eye to the historical, economic, and social reasons that explain the hopelessness – I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream. Hope is an ontological need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and becomes a distortion of that ontological need.

When it becomes a program, hopelessness paralyzes us, immobilizes us. We succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we need absolutely need for a fierce struggle that will re-create the world.

I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential concrete imperative. (Freire, 2004, p. 2)

## **Chapter Two: The Art of Hosting is a question, not an answer**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore key facets and assumptions that I have identified as being ways of accessing or interpreting the Art of Hosting (AoH). I will explore some of the assumptions underpinning the Art of Hosting's approach and offer that common definitions of the Art of Hosting (as a suite of methods, as training, as a network) belie and distract from the Art of Hosting's actual purpose. In the first section, I delve into the challenges inherent in defining and understanding the Art of Hosting and its unconventional organizational structure. In the second section, I trek back to the beginnings of the Art of Hosting and give some examples of its use in the world. In the final and longest section, I offer an alternative way of defining the Art of Hosting and delve into its underlying assumptions.

My research into the Art of Hosting has been informed by a variety of sources: the rich, informal blogosphere generated by the worldwide Art of Hosting community; a number of websites dedicated to the Art of Hosting; the writings, both published and unpublished, of fellow thinkers and researchers; a small number of academic articles, theses, and dissertations published in recent years; the handbooks generated by Art of Hosting communities around the world to accompany their training events; my own experience participating in four separate Art of Hosting trainings/events; the experience and ongoing conversations I share with my colleagues as we practice hosting in our own work and communities; and finally the interviews I conducted with six experienced Art of Hosting practitioners – which will be analyzed in a later chapter. Additionally, I have drawn from the literature of organizational development, social change, and dialogical thinking to inform and support my thinking.

### **Call and response: An attempt at defining the Art of Hosting**

As of February 2016 there were 6,784 members of the international Art of Hosting Facebook page (and dozens of regional Art of Hosting pages), and 2,703 members on the Ning site. This is in addition to the main Art of Hosting website, a number of regional sites, and an

enduring active listserv<sup>7</sup>. Perusing the member profiles on the Art of Hosting's Ning and Facebook pages, the pattern of who joins these pages quickly becomes obvious: for the most part facilitators, consultants, educators, managers, community organizers, and social entrepreneurs. Basically, the typical profile seems to be of a person who works with groups of people.

A call-out to the community on the main Facebook page inquiring as to the number of Art of Hosting practitioners resulted in this response from Ria Baeck, one of the international stewards: "I guess nobody knows, as we are no organization [sic], and nobody counts the people who have been in a training...." (Baeck, 2015). A similar call-out to the international listserv generated many more questions about what it means to be a practitioner, what ways practitioners could be estimated, and whether it would even be possible to count the numbers. The recurrent response was that though this was a great question to ponder, this information simply had not been tabulated, nor would it be (Hunt et al., 2015). "Dear Elizabeth," quipped one responder, "we are a lot and will be more!"

An unknown (but presumably large) number of practitioners around the world use the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter (Art of Hosting or AoH) to describe their work as "a highly effective way of harnessing the collective wisdom and self-organizing capacity of groups of any size [...] a suite of powerful conversational processes to invite people to step in and take charge of the challenges facing them." (Art of Hosting website)

Frieze and Wheatley (2011) define the Art of Hosting as "conversational processes that resolve conflicts, develop strategies, analyze issues, and create action plans" (p. 28). Sandfort and Quick (2014, 2015) refer to the Art of Hosting as a deliberative process, a "potent tool for building capacity to facilitate uncommon conversations" (2015, p. 42) and state that "hosting is more of an assemblage of practices than a method" (2012, p. 303). Sumas (2010) calls the Art of Hosting "an innovative methodology for hosting conversations about questions that matter" (p. 99) and Magzan (2011) offers "AoH represents a set of practices based on the common sense [...] to bring stakeholders together in conversation when new solutions for the common good are needed (p. 23)."

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<sup>7</sup> With 1338 daily digests as of February 8, 2016.

It is important to note that while ‘Art of Hosting’ is most often employed the full name is The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations That Matter. The ‘harvesting’ part refers to capturing (whether it be through written words, drawing, video, photos, or other forms) the reflections, information, decisions, plans, or other more intangible outputs (such as relationships) that come out of a hosted gathering. (“What is the Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter?,” n.d.)

In my many (many) conversations I have had with Art of Hosting practitioners over the last three years I have often asked others the question “What exactly is the Art of Hosting?” and have been consistently met with responses that touch on the following themes: a) it is a set of facilitation/conversational methods; b) it is a three-day training event c) it is an international network connected by online platforms (such as the main website, the Ning site, the Facebook page, and various blogs) d) it is a “practice” like yoga or tai chi where you keep learning and getting better but are never “done” e) all of the above.

When I have been asked the same question by others my response has usually started with “Umm... well... ahhh...” and I proceed to dash off one or more of the themes on the above list. Lately, I have been synthesizing my answer to a simple “the Art of Hosting is a way of working with groups of people”. A response I find as frustratingly nebulous and void of real content as the ones I receive from my conversational counterparts.

During a conversation over a beer my colleague, Paul Messer, recounted how he had recently been asked to contribute his graphic recording skills (using drawing and key words to capture conversations in real time) at an event to “Y’know, make it more art-of-hosting-y!”. We shared a laugh at this oversimplification and all too common interpretation. Another colleague, Samantha Slade told me about a client that cautioned against using an “art-of-hosting-y” style of facilitation for an upcoming contract as they had seen photos online and was turned off by the “touchy-feely” vibe. Interestingly, Samantha, an Art of Hosting steward, regularly uses hosting practices in high-profile, high-stakes contexts, for example within a three-year mandate with the European Commission hosting dozens of meetings to move key projects forward with representatives of twenty-eight member-states.

In the last three years, having the Art of Hosting be the object of my studies and increasingly part of my practice as a facilitator, I have learned that attempting to erect an enclosure around a single fixed idea of the Art of Hosting is tricky, risking a disingenuous, facile, or obtuse rendering of something that is both intangible and ever-changing. It is much easier to wrap one's mind around the idea of something being a set technique, method, training, or even network than it is a "way of harnessing the collective wisdom and self-organizing capacity of groups of any size" (Art of Hosting site) – especially if the "way" continues to shift and change.

Often the Art of Hosting is defined by what it is *not*. On the main Art of Hosting site it is simply referred to as a network that "has no formal, legal structure, no appointed leader, no accreditation program and no controlling body" certifying or evaluating the 'proper' application of the Art of Hosting. As Jerry Nagel (2015) has ascertained in his doctoral dissertation it is difficult to trace the history of the Art of Hosting, stating "there is no formal corporate brand, no certification, no proprietary AoH books or videos, no staff and no head office" (p. 158). He remarks that "as a self-organizing, emergent system the Art of Hosting has many beginnings. Within the AoH community creating a precise history is in fact not important to the story of AoH" (Nagel, 2015, p. 156).

Baeck insists, "it is good to remember that we are a real network, a self-organising network" (Art of Hosting Online Community site). Tuesday Ryan-Hart reflects on how all of this self-organizing makes it challenging for anyone outside of the Art of Hosting to "get" what it is:

One of the limitations of the AofH is that if you don't have strong boundaries and you have permeability that lets people in sometimes that's hard to figure out how to access. It's like there's no clear doorway in. I continue to hear that about AofH. So for me, it's very permeable: 'Come on in, you're welcome? Want to be part of the community? Great, you're part of the community!' But I've heard other people say, 'But how do I interact with AofH? You don't have an organization, you don't have an info@artofhosting, right? I don't get it.' It's kind of hard to get. That is a major limitation. In can be hard to get, because you're looking to get your arms around something that doesn't necessarily have these boundaries. Sometimes it's actually a barrier to accessing. (Sandfort, Quick, & Stuber, 2012, p. 15)

Commenting on a previous draft of this chapter Chris Corrigan (2015c) noted "you describe what we are NOT doing in the AoH community, and what we don't have. And that's

useful to note because we don't take an ordered systems approach to the community of practice. [...] Therefore traditional forms of leadership, such as manifestos, rigid boundaries, competencies and regulation are simply not appropriate, not only on an ethical basis but on an ontological basis: you just can't get 'there' with that view".

### **Hosting is as simple as being a host (but you don't have to call it that)**

In the late afternoon of a rainy autumn day in 2013 I sat down with Toke Paludan Møller, largely credited with being the initiator of the first conversation that birthed AoH, to interview him about the origins of the Art of Hosting and learn about his perspective on it as both one of its founders and as a dedicated practitioner. Our interview took place on a comfy couch in the corner of Paul and Samantha's, (the above-mentioned colleagues) home: occasionally interrupted by offers of tea, of wine or beer, an invitation to come view a rainbow that had appeared when the sun finally pierced through the clouds, and punctuated by the chop-chop-chop of Paul's knife as he prepared a delicious-smelling supper for all of us. These seemingly insignificant details are exactly what Toke latched on to as he shared his perspective on the Art of Hosting with me:

Without organizing, in any lighter or more structured form, good conversation doesn't seem to happen. There needs to be something. Right now we have a nice home to sit in, we have a place to have our meeting, our hosts have brought us tea, we have a rainbow out there. We have things there... and then we land and then you can ask me questions and I can be living into those questions and speak to them from my experience. So through my whole life I have experienced that when we share deep stories with each other and we honestly are talking with each other about what matters to us then a certain kind of very simple magic occurs or a simple quality of togetherness, a quality of content begins to emerge. (T. Paludan Møller, interview, October 7, 2013)

As a child I remember my mother spending days making the house spotless and then being holed up in the kitchen whilst we 'entertained': stressed from trying to get all of the details just right, she barely interacted with our guests beyond *donner la bise*, wouldn't accept any help other than carrying out the pickle tray, and usually didn't even taste the meal she had prepared. When she finally emerged – exhausted – from the kitchen at the end of the night she would be congratulated for her hard work but also chided for missing the laughter and conversation, for

not having partaken in the storytelling: memories and connections that would most likely endure much longer than the taste of a perfectly executed *Coquille St-Jacques*.

In recent years I have learned that many others share strikingly similar memories to this one, embellished, of course, by the particular idiosyncrasies of each family. Essentially the reigning idea seems to be that in order to successfully bring a group of people together it is obligatory to plan out every detail, control the circumstances as much as possible, and oversee the event's execution. This is the default setting the Art of Hosting seeks to destabilize "At the simplest level," blogs Corrigan (2007),

you can think of a party. A facilitator is like a party planner, or a wedding organizer, running around taking care of details, scripting the event and staying outside of the experience. A party host, by contrast, is *inside* the experience, invested in the outcome, bringing energy to conversations, not only form, and both affecting and being affected by the experience. [italics mine]

Toke recounts:

For many, many years I worked as a conference organizer so I was always in the business and the practice of working with how to bring people together. [...] There is something about the dance and the connectivity between conversations that are hosted and held and what it makes possible between people that has always interested me. And then through my conference organizing work I experienced many, many meetings that did not take off. They were boring. We would spend millions of dollars and five thousand people would come to a convention and we would have twenty keynote speakers but the people who were sitting there were more or less treated like cattle so that the experts could show off, to say it bluntly. And of course not all conferences are like this but this dissemination of knowledge unto people... which is part of the machine paradigm of how kids have been taught... not triggering the ability for individual and collective learning. I became frustrated with this. I felt I am wasting my time. These people are wasting their time. The clients who paid me to do this were wasting their time... something could be more. And so out of that I began to be on this quest. Because I also had this experience that every once in a while some meetings, some conference would take off. And it would become both content-wise, interesting, fun to be with people and friendships began to grow out of this. Some of my friends I have met out of this kind of situation. So I thought "*What is the art here?*" Would it be possible to begin to investigate the art of... this hosting and harvesting conversations that matter in order to create learning? (T. Paludan Møller, interview, October 7, 2013)

Toke's *cri du coeur*, his questioning, resonated with others. Nagel (2015) offers an *aperçu* of the Art of Hosting's early emergence as simply investigating questions of what it means to "host", to its gradual development as a vast global network of individuals, and even organizations, rallying around the promise of the Art of Hosting.

Toke's words, and the language of hosting in general can be seen as opaque and inaccessible. There seems to be two levels of language in the Art of Hosting community: the language practitioners use when speaking to each other, and then the outside-facing language for the un-initiated, what Kathy Jourdain (2015) calls 'stealth hosting', she writes: "We might never use the terminology of AoH with a client as we are not interested in promoting any particular practice as much as we are interested in meeting the needs and outcomes of the work we have identified with the client." (ShapeShift blog, para. 4). She continues: "if we become attached to the language, we risk losing the intention of what we are doing – bringing people together in different ways, to engage them more fully, hear them more clearly and find connections, inspiration and ideas that might not have existed before." (para. 15)

The European Commission has repeatedly collaborated with Toke and other Art of Hosting practitioners under the Art of Participatory Leadership rubric (perhaps a term less opaque than hosting) to offer training in participatory facilitation methods to stakeholders in its various services. One workshop document states: "The traditional ways of leading and organising meetings are no longer workable, and tapping into the potential held in the organisation is crucial. Allowing everyone to participate with their diverse perspectives is the key to releasing this potential. (in Merry, 2012)

The Scottish Parliament has called upon Art of Hosting practitioners to train Scots on "the art of hosting authentic conversations, at every level of Scottish society, to lead us to wiser action and real change" around the future of Scotland (Scotland's Future Forum, para 1).

"In this absolutely ordinary city, citizens are discovering their capacity to engage together to create a healthier, more resilient community," write Frieze and Wheatley (2011, p. 28) as they describe the impact of almost a decade's worth of applied hosting practices in Columbus, Ohio. What started with a single World Café on food security led to game-changing conversations on healthcare and homelessness. "Columbus," Frieze and Wheatley continue, "like any major city,

is a collection of institutions locked in hierarchy and politics trying to do useful work.” Using hosting practices, allowed city leaders to be in direct conversation with citizens of all stripes (sometimes realizing along the way that they were asking the wrong questions) and shift solution-finding from the exclusive domain of leadership positions towards the collective intelligence of the community.

In Zimbabwe, Kufunda Learning Village is an eco-sustainable community where Art of Hosting is the default mode as “just about all of us are facilitators and hosts of learning and co-creation” (About us, para 2). In addition to practicing sustainable agriculture and the cultivation of healing plants, Kufunda offers leadership programs and Art of Hosting training to both locals and international participants. “Kufunda,” writes Kelly McGowan (2015) “has been a beacon for the Art of Hosting community as proof that our practices could be an operating system for sustainability. If it could be fully operational in Zimbabwe for the past 15 years, imagine what would be possible in our Western organizations and projects?” (para. 4)

Closer to home, percolab (the organization I joined in 2013) has been using hosting practices (mostly stealth hosting) in its work with institutions, municipalities, and other organizations, often on highly technical (not to mention political) projects. In 2012, percolab hosted the Montreal Insectarium through a co-design process for its “Metamorphosis” project as it sought to transform not only its exhibits but add a new building as well (Stopa, 2015). In 2013, it hosted the *Conseil régional des élus* (regional council of elected officials) through an eight-part ideation circle to develop a vision of Montreal as a learning city. And, in 2014-15, it worked with the City of Montreal to host citizens into giving input into a new public space to be built over an existing highway in downtown Montreal (percolab portfolio).

### **Beyond the methods**

The Art of Hosting is often referred to as a “toolbox for hosting good dialogue” (Nagel, 2015, p. 19), a “suite of methods” or “powerful conversational processes” (Art of Hosting website), and “a range of engagement techniques” (Lundquist et al., 2013, p. 16). A lengthier definition proposed in one of the training handbooks suggests that the Art of Hosting is

an emerging group of methodologies for facilitating conversation in groups of all sizes, supported by principles that help maximize collective intelligence, integrate and utilize diversity and minimize/transform conflict. Processes facilitated in this way tend to result in collective clarity and wise action - sustainable, workable solutions to the most complex problems. The approach ensures that stakeholders buy into the process (because they participate in the design and the process is by definition transparent) and make ongoing feedback, learning and course correction a natural and efficient part of life. (*Art of Hosting*, 2011, p. 4)

Campbell (2016), reframes this definition: “Art of Hosting isn’t a specific method, it’s more a way of working that is about hosting useful, relevant, participatory, inclusive meetings and events where people get to engage in dialogue and express their views with the aim of leading to sustainable change and action taking place” (para. 1). As such, It is not especially useful to delve into the mechanics of the different methods associated to the Art of Hosting, as it is not their exact application that matters but rather the possibilities for generating dialogue that makes them valuable. It can become all too easy to get tripped up in methodological guidelines and jargon (Quick and Sandfort, 2015, p. 39) or even to view the Art of Hosting itself as a panacea to apply to every group situation (Art of Hosting Story and Lineage, 2011). Merry (2011) recounts the beginnings of the Art of Hosting as a “reaction to people becoming disciples of methodologies” (1:43). “Although we wanted to train in methodologies,” Merry continues, “we felt a bit like it was a red herring. There is a worldview that you can work at the level of... that underpins all the methods... and this whole being disciples of methodologies is kidding ourselves somehow” (2:24).

In essence, conversational methods and processes can be viewed as containers (Corrigan, 2015a; Nagel, 2015) that structure and hold the content of intentional conversations. Corrigan calls these containers the “intangible yet real spaces in which the potential and possibility of a group can unfold” (p. 291). “These are not simply meetings alone,” Corrigan continues, “but rather can be conceived as a nested set of spaces within which inquiry, learning, and meaning making take place” (p. 217).

Here are some recent examples I have personally witnessed or experienced of facilitators, managers, and educators - some of whom may never have heard of the Art of Hosting -

consciously and artfully aligning ‘containers and content’ and using the (non-capitalized) ‘art of hosting’ to bring groups into dialogue:

- It is the facilitator who throws out her entire design for a work session and establishes a dialogue circle when she realizes the group of mayors and city administrators she is facilitating must work through a simmering conflict before they can get back to ‘real’ work.
- It is the university professor who pulls current headlines into his classroom and skillfully brings in television satire to engage students in a discussion about ‘reasonable accommodation’ as a surreptitious way of fleshing out broader philosophical and ethical concepts.
- It is the workshop leader who unselfconsciously and graciously creates space for a participant to co-facilitate when she realizes that this person has just as much knowledge of the topic at hand as she does.
- It is the manager who insists his team take the time to answer a personal, but relevant, ‘check-in’ and ‘check-out’ question at the beginning and end of even the most technical meeting.
- It is the professional facilitators, asked to MC a traditional conference of keynote speakers, panelists, and powerpoints, who ‘hack’ it by slipping in moments for solo reflection and group dialogue that connects the themes to participants own realities.
- It is the consultants, hired to write a feasibility study for a social entrepreneurship project in a low-income neighbourhood, that turn it into a participatory process by opening up all the work sessions to the community.

The Berkana Institute offers this nuance about hosting: “rather than working with a pre-determined agenda [...] the “art” is approaching each conversation from a distinct perspective, then crafting the best design for the specific context.” (Berkana website). In other words, it is not the panoply of facilitation tools that distinguishes the Art of Hosting; it is the careful curating of powerful questions and containers aligned with the purpose of the gathering by practitioners who

hold a “deep consciousness” of how methods and processes can influence, enable or inhibit groups on their journey to accomplish what they are trying to get done (Corrigan, 2015b). Indeed, anyone in the business of facilitating – not to mention teaching – who approaches their work as a craft requiring care and commitment, is engaging with this ‘art’; they just might not call it the Art of Hosting.

### **Of attractors and shared assumptions**

My facilitation work is what initially drew me to the Art of Hosting (and not the other way around). When I attended my first Art of Hosting training I felt surprised, yet affirmed, by how the ‘hosts’ used language like ‘space’, ‘steward’, ‘conversation’, ‘container’ and ‘content’, in a strikingly similar way to how I used it in my own previous work. I had rarely encountered this perspective on organizing events and learning for large groups of people. This was my domain, my expertise, and yet here were complete strangers employing terms that I already used as shorthand with an intimate group of colleagues that “got” the kind of work I did and why. I deeply appreciated meeting people that spoke of creating “spaces for conversation” and could so easily engage in a discussion as to, say, the difference between stewarding and participating in a conversation.

I return to Murphy (1999) to interpret the AoH network as a “reference group” where individuals from all over the world are drawn to the Art of Hosting. Once they find each other they reflect on the contradictions and considerations in their work and situate their reflection in relation to the experience of others, and the contexts they experience: which “help us to place the ambiguities and contradictions of such ‘ situations’ in a broader context of shared norms, values, assumptions, ideals, and sociocultural analyses” (p. 104).

“In complexity [theory],” Corrigan (2015c) offers,

we talk about managing boundaries and attractors. Boundaries are permeable, and attractors are invitational. You don’t need a strong boundary because the attractor acts as a kind of gravity well, attracting attention onto itself. As we work with attractors we see what works and do more of that, and when we see stuff that doesn’t work, we stop doing it. [...]

The boundaries around AoH are basically principles. We know we're outside of them when we feel it. If someone were to copyright AoH that would be a pretty clear violation of the boundary. If we were to start using mechanistic form of system intervention, folks might declare that outside the bounds. (personal correspondence).

What then is the 'central attractor' of the Art of Hosting? What are the principles that draw thousands of people to the various online platforms and thousands more to trainings all over the world every year? I propose that it is indeed a set of assumptions that define and give meaning to the Art of Hosting – rather than the focus on methods and frameworks and trainings. Several sources (Art of Hosting website, Berkana website, multiple training handbooks) explicitly name assumptions that underpin the Art of Hosting. However, they are formulated in a somewhat hermetic way that I find hard to understand if one stands 'outside' the Art of Hosting 'looking in'.

Taking this into consideration I have reformulated what I have gleaned from my wider reading on and experience with the Art of Hosting into four key assumptions:

1. We are living a crisis of immense complexity;
2. Finding appropriate solutions requires us to shift our thinking;
3. Dialogue enables us to access collective intelligence;
4. We can identify and learn from recurring patterns in our work

I suggest that sharing in these principles (or assumptions) is the invitation that the Art of Hosting is making. Bohm (1996) reminds us that a culture is composed of shared assumptions and meaning (p.32) and that it is the degree to which meaning is understood and shared that determines the level of coherence (or incoherence) and functionality (or dysfunctionality) of a society. These shared assumptions are then the 'attractor' around which the 'permeable boundaries' position themselves. The specific methods associated with the Art of Hosting are simply vehicles that are constantly being changed, improved and adapted by a network of individuals attracted by these assumptions. New methods or ideas (and maybe even assumptions) either resonate with the gathered community or not – perhaps moved deeper in, or further away from, the 'permeable boundary'.

### **Assumption #1: We are living a crisis of immense complexity**

In the opening pages of a training handbook the Art of Hosting is described as a “response to a world that is becoming increasingly complex and fragmented [...] at a time when institutions and democracies are failing to address the increasing chaos of our world” (p. 4). I find it useful to go outside of the Art of Hosting blogosphere to contemplate the underlying questions here: “Why have we accepted this state of affairs which is so destructive and so dangerous and so conducive to unhappiness?” asks Bohm (2004). “It seems,”

we’re mesmerized in some way. We go on with this insanity and nobody seems to know what to do or say. In the past people used to hope that some solution would appear, such as democracy or socialism or something else, perhaps religion; but this hopeful state of mind is very much weakened now because it has not worked out at all. (p. 56)

“The real crisis,” continues Bohm,

is not in these events which are confronting us, like wars and crime and drugs and economic chaos and pollution; it’s really in the thought which is making it – all the time. Each person can do something about that thought because he’s in it. But one of the troubles we get into is to say, “It’s they who are thinking all that, and I am thinking right.” I say that’s a mistake. I say thought *pervades* us. It’s similar to a virus – somehow this is a disease of thought, of knowledge, of information, spreading all over the world. The more computers, radio, and television we have, the faster it spreads. So the kind of thought that’s going on all around us begins to take over in every one of us, without our even noticing it. It’s spreading like a virus and each one of us is nourishing that virus. (p. 58).

This allegorical virus has (quite unsurprisingly, in my view) spread to big business as much as to the activist sphere. “Our prevailing system of management,” says Deming (in Senge, 1990)

has destroyed our people. People are born with intrinsic motivation, self-respect, dignity, curiosity to learn, joy in learning. The forces of destruction begin with toddlers – a prize for the best Halloween costume, grades in school, gold stars – and on up through university. On the job, people, teams, and divisions are ranked, reward for the top, punishment for the bottom. Management by Objectives, quotas, incentive pay, business plans, put together separately, division by division, cause further loss, unknown and unknowable.

Perhaps it is time, as Hassan (2014) argues, to move beyond our current approach to

solving complex multi-causal issues with top-down, planning-focused, solution-driven techniques which is akin to flipping on the autopilot button to get a plane through a storm – the worst possible idea (p. X).

“Something else is missing,” admonishes Isaacs (1999),

something subtle, almost invisible, and yet powerful enough that it can prevent even the leaders of the seven largest industrialized nations of the world from providing truly great leadership, the kind of leadership that inspires and that brings out the best in people. Clearly, providing this kind of direction is every leader’s dream: It is a dream so deeply held that it may often go unvoiced. Yet very few politicians – and not many of the rest of us – succeed in reaching this height.

What is lacking? Is it some innate quality of wisdom that only a few of us have? Or is it related, as Abba Eban suggested, to the fact that we don’t know how to think or talk together in a way that summons up our own deeply held common sense, wisdom, and potential? (p. 2)

### **Assumption #2: Finding appropriate solutions requires us to shift our thinking**

A recent blog post (Coleman, 2015) in the Harvard Business Review laments “the great unveil” – that moment where consultant/adviser/expert/specialist reveals the glossy, well thought-out, carefully-crafted solution they have devised to deal with whatever problem they had been hired to resolve. Yet, “the great unveil” more often produces skepticism and dismay (“Yeah, but...”; “We already...”) than the expected “ooohs” and “aaahs”.

“When we created a perfect solution in isolation and made it “ours” to present” admits Coleman, “we ignored the fact that each individual needed to arrive at the conclusions independently to really understand it, to believe in it, and to be willing to work hard to execute it.” His perspective: get people talking and involved in the co-creation of solutions. The unveil may no longer be “great” but it will probably be more impactful: “creating an ethos of conversation,” Coleman continues, “rather than a one-sided presentation, for critical discussions can better leverage the collective intelligence of the team, make solutions to organizational problems better and more comprehensive, and improve ownership for execution of ideas.”

Frieze and Wheatley (2011) juxtapose this perspective from the dominant belief in the hero archetype – “the ones who will fix everything and make our problems go away” (p. 27).

“These beliefs,” they continue, “give rise to models of command and control that are revered in organizations and governments worldwide. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy submit to the greater vision and expertise of those above” (p. 27). According to Groysberg and Slind (2012) even in the corporate sector this model of leadership is no longer viable as top-down messaging no longer works (p. 10). “Smart leaders today,” they state, “engage with employees in a way that resembles an ordinary person-to-person conversation more than it does a series of commands from on high. Furthermore, they initiate practices and foster cultural norms that instill a conversational sensibility throughout their organizations” (p. 4).

For Groysberg and Slind, these practices take the form of intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality – essential elements of both interpersonal and organizational conversation (2012, p. 4) that shift the dynamics away from one-way communication and “enables participants to share ownership of the substance of their discussion. As a consequence, they can put their own ideas – and indeed their heart and souls – into the conversational arena” (p. 7). In exploring how fostering and harnessing collective intelligence is at the heart of the Art of Hosting’s practice, Magzan (2012) offers “if we could better understand how to support it [collective intelligence], increase it and facilitate it, we would be more able to effectively cocreate a better world.” (p. 21).

For Frieze and Wheatley (2011) instilling a conversational culture is about more than shifting leadership practices and certainly not about “getting people to like each other or feel good” (p. 31), it is about getting at the root of complex systemic change:

If we want to transform complex systems, we need to abandon our exclusive reliance on the leader-as-hero and invite in the leader-as-host. Leaders who act as hosts rely on other people’s creativity and commitment to get the work done. Leaders-as-hosts see potential and skills in people that people themselves may not see. And they know that people will only support those things they’ve played a part in creating. Leaders-as-hosts invest in meaningful conversations among people from many parts of the system as the most productive way to engender new insights and possibilities for action. They trust that people are willing to contribute, and that most people yearn to find meaning and possibility in their lives and work. And these leaders know that hosting others is the only way to get large-scale, intractable problems solved. (p. 28)

Scharmer, the author of *Theory U* – a work often cited by Art of Hosting practitioners, calls “for a new consciousness and a new collective leadership capacity to meet challenges in a more conscious, intentional, and strategic way. The development of such a capacity will allow us to create a future of greater possibility” (The Presencing Institute, n.d., p. 1). The promise of the Art of Hosting then is that inviting in participation is the key to this collective leadership (*Art of Hosting*, 2011).

If organizations can be understood as an aggregate of relationships (Nilsson, 2006, p. 24) than each organization (even the most nefarious) is not static; like the people that comprise it, it is ever-learning and ever-changing. If we accept this idea, then we, as individual citizens, can learn to change the way we relate to each other and the organizations we engage with and create structures that, in turn, influence us differently; “it is hard to remember that we created these organizations, and that we continue to re-create them every day” (Nilsson, 2006, pp. 11).

“The Art of Hosting,” one blogger writes

invites us to think differently about how we come together, how we solve problems, how we engage one another in the social space, and ultimately, invites a different kind of institutional behavior. Art of Hosting - the participatory model and assumptions - moves us into systems level thinking and behavior which better suits solving the systemic, complex problems that are facing us. (glendenb, 2011, para. 11)

### **Assumption #3: Dialogue enables us to access collective intelligence**

Toke’s vision of the Art of Hosting is bold: “The Art of Hosting is a calling. And the calling has always been within me. We support conversations that are meaningful, generative, and deeply honoring of the wisdom each person carries into the room. Hosting is an evolutionary tool for humanity. The talking together is the healing together.” (Baldwin, 2005, p. 187).

In a blog posting entitled *Why you should come to an Art of Hosting*, Corrigan (2015b) notes the experiential nature of the learning at Art of Hosting trainings and divulges: “for me, the pursuit of mastery in the practice of hosting conversations is the way I respond to the complexity that we are facing in the world. When faced with uncertainty and emergent problems, it is imperative that we engage in collective intelligence and create the conditions for good sense-making and decision-making” (para 3. )

“It is self-evident,” says Murphy, an activist and author un-connected to the Art of Hosting,

that in general, ‘our’ analysis is going to be more comprehensive and valid than ‘my’ analysis completed in isolation. In dialogue we have the benefit of a broad pool of experience, knowledge, approach and perceptual orientation. In the process of growth and the practice of freedom, such a resource is invaluable. On the one hand, it dissipates our negative (or positive) fantasies, which impede critical awareness and inhibit action; on the other, it broadens our perspectives and understanding, and introduces untested feasibilities that might never have occurred to us in isolation (p. 105).

“The Art of Hosting is about the art of leading by engaging stakeholders and convening people in order to create new collective intelligence, take wise actions and create sustainable solutions,” states one of the many participant handbooks (The Art of leading in participatory ways: Hosting conversations that matter, 2009). “Hosting conversations,” asserts Corrigan (n.d.), “is both more and less than facilitating. It means taking responsibility for creating and holding the container in which a group of people can do their best work together” (p. 3).

Citing the case of Columbus, Ohio where the Art of Hosting is being practiced in many different domains and sectors, Frieze and Wheatley (2011) touch on how the assumptions that inhabit and underpin the Art of Hosting translate into change:

The leaders of Columbus have created substantive change by relying on everyone’s creativity, commitment, and generosity. They’ve learned that these qualities are present in everyone and in every organization. They’ve extended sincere invitations, asked good questions, and had the courage to experiment. Their courageous efforts moved across the city, state, and nation, gaining ground where heroes had once prevailed. And now, people are discovering what’s been there all along—fully human beings wanting to make a difference for themselves, their city, their children, and the future. (p. 31)

Bohm (1996) designates the intention of dialogue as understanding how we think, not simply what we think about in order to “chang[e] the way thought process occurs collectively” (p. 10). “This deep structure of thought is what is common,” Bohm states, “and this is what we have to get at. We will have to come to see that the content of thought and the deep structure are not really separate, because the way we think about thought has an effect on its structure.” (p.59). Scharmer (2008) reminds us that while it is possible to track the *actions* of leaders but we “know very little about the inner place, the source from which they operate” (p.

52). He proposes that “profound change today not only requires a shift of the mind, it requires a shift of will and a shift of the heart” (p. 59).

Returning to Freire (2000) for a brief moment reminds us that dialogue is not simply about talking with someone else. He evokes its epistemological nature: “I engage in dialogue,” Freire tells us,

not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing. (p. 17)

Nagel (2015) proposes that the Art of Hosting is anchored in a relational constructionist perspective (p. 229), specifically:

AoH and relational constructionism favor the kinds of dialogue that creates spaces for every voice to be heard and there is always an invitation for a new voice to enter the conversations. Both support co-creation and colearning so that new realities can emerge. Both use practices that open up multiple self-other relations, i.e. a dialogic rather than a monologic view of people. Art of Hosting and relational constructionism offer that through good dialogue we can come together to coconstruct new ways of being together, unconstrained by past constructs, recognizing that they were also co-created through dialogue. Both invite us to be curious about taken-for-granted traditions or limiting beliefs and to explore who might be privileged by them and whose voice might be silenced or suppressed. Both view relationships as the foundation of our societies. Both believe that by being in relationship we open up possibilities for new ways of being together or new possible futures. (p. 230)

Glasser (2009) characterizes any learning that involves input from others as social learning (p. 49). He further differentiates between passive and active social learning. Passive social learning, he states, can be either the consuming of information created by others (i.e. attending a lecture, watching TV) or the observation of others’ interactions. While active social learning is “built on conscious interaction and communication [...] it is inherently dialogical” (p. 51). He proposes that active social learning offers increased opportunity for creating innovation and “more open, equitable, and competent learning processes” (p. 51). Murphy (1999) agrees:

The phenomenon of learning is individual and personal. But it is evident that the learning process will be more productive if it involves dialogue and the sharing of perceptions concerning common phenomena being investigated, since dialogue maximizes the variety of perceptions, insights, and alternative conclusions from which eventually to conclude

an interpretation of the reality under scrutiny. Our learning is enhanced when we have the benefit of a pool of information, perceptions and vantage points, and are exposed to the rigour of debate on conflicting perceptions of reality. (p. 92)

Glasser (2009), however, goes further by suggesting that the interactive process of active social learning also serves to highlight and challenge behaviours and assumptions that are maladaptive to what he calls ecocultural sustainability: “a state of dynamic equilibrium and a social process that is desirable and ecologically sound” (p. 36). Key in this interpretation is the notion of an ecoculturally sustainable social process. “It calls”, Glasser declares, “for educational processes and systems that nurture active citizens and open minds by encouraging wonder, creativity, tolerance, cooperation, and collaboration” (p. 36). Zibechi (2007) writes that we “should concentrate on constructing social relations different from hegemonic ones, relations anchored in horizontality and reciprocity” (p. 1). Murphy (2015) assesses that “agency depends critically on knowledge created, recuperated, shared. And the dynamic interaction among knowledge, action and the actual world is the crucible of change” (p.5).

#### **Assumption #4: We can identify and learn from recurring patterns in our work**

I text my colleague Samantha: “My group is in the groan zone...” She texts back a smiley face – I know that *she* knows exactly what I am talking about. And I know that the next time I see her we will take a moment to talk about this particular “groan zone” and I will tell her about what I learned and she will share her most recent “groan zones” with me and what she learned. This shared language is anchored in an individual and collective understanding we have forged around identifying patterns in our work (and the world around us), thanks in part, to our participation in the Art of Hosting community.

In this instance, the “groan zone” refers to the middle part of the Diamond of Participation (Kaner, 2014), which illustrates the (often painful) transition from divergent to convergent thinking. In its simplest form we can look at the example of a group of friends trying to decide where to have supper as an act of divergent-convergent thinking: each arrives with their own particular budgetary considerations, food preferences (or restrictions), and level of hunger (not to mention personality) and must together decide what and where to eat. “Sushi?”, says one.

“Too expensive!” responds another. “Pasta?” says a third. “No, I’m gluten-free”, responds the sushi-suggester. “Chinatown?” someone pipes up. “Too *far!*” is the collective response. “I really, really want Mexican!” insists one friend. “No!” the others respond unanimously. This continues for several more rounds as each suggestion gets thrown out and shut down until most everyone is frustrated with the situation. “Let’s just go there,” declares one friend, pointing to the Mexican restaurant across the street. “Whatever!” says one. “Let’s just eat!” says another. “Yeah, but...” starts a third, but never finishes.

This group of friends started with a bunch of different needs and opinions (divergence) expecting that could easily settle on a place that would please everyone (convergence) and assure a fun Friday night. Instead indecision and frustration take root (the groan zone) and a decision ends up being unsatisfyingly made by one strong-willed individual with everyone else following because they are too hungry (or hangry) to argue anymore and just want to get on with it. While this is a rather mundane example, the dynamics at play can easily be extrapolated to family finances; a corporate brainstorming session; planning by committee; strategic decision-making for a community organization: essentially any situation where multiple perspectives are expected to coalesce into a decision.

“In ideation literature,” says Bill:

the transition between divergent and convergent thinking seems trivial, in many cases it is expected to be a smooth switch without any need to pay attention to. Unfortunately this perception has nothing to do with reality. In reality this switch is cumbersome to the extent that most groups never do it. They either close the discussion too prematurely at the cost of not attaining the ideas with most potential, or they diverge until they become paralyzed by the in-numerous options they have created. (n.d., para. 5)

The road between theory and practice, thinking and doing, or ideas and action can be a long and bumpy one. In the case of the Art of Hosting the road between holding a worldview (or assumptions) and appropriately applying methods to host meaningful conversations can also be long and bumpy. The “groan zone” is but one of several patterns or frameworks associated to the Art of Hosting which are intended to support hosts in designing their events and being able to adapt to arising circumstances and make the most out of emerging opportunities (Quick and Sandfort, 2014).

Often these patterns and frameworks are illustrated with hand-drawn or computerized images and given simplified terms. Quick and Sandfort (2014) emphasize the importance of this ongoing development of collective thinking and resources in that “hosting knowledge is supported and generated through an open source, democratic philosophy in which the methods and ideas draw upon pooled knowledge, facilitation techniques and frameworks, developed by others to share them at no cost within the community” (p. 303).

For example, “developing powerful questions is a crucial element to creating the conversational space we are seeking,” says Jourdain (2011, para. 1). Corrigan (n.d., p. 5) asserts “a good question is aligned with the need and purpose of the meeting and invites us to go to another level.” Yet, there is a pattern that can be elicited from the experience of having to repeatedly formulate questions to inform a dialogical process and this has been written about by a number of practitioners. An oft-cited piece in the Art of Hosting literature states that

a powerful question: generates curiosity in the listener; stimulates reflective conversation; is thought-provoking; surfaces underlying assumptions; invites creativity and new possibilities; generates energy and forward movement; channels attention and focuses inquiry; stays with participants; touches a deep meaning; evokes more questions. (Vogt, et al., 2003, p. 4).

There are many (many) other patterns and frameworks that “name dynamics that facilitators recognize from their prior experience, making their knowledge of them visible and practical, helping them to make sense of complex or ambiguous group dynamics” (Quick and Sandfort, 2014, p. 307). Some commonly referenced practices as available on the AoH Ning site include: The Four-Fold Practice which puts into images and words the interior conditions necessary for each person to engage in meaningful conversation on both the short and long-term . The Chaordic Path illustrates the tension that arises when it is necessary for a group to move beyond black-and-white to thinking in shades of grey. It situates chaos and order (thus the term chaordic) on a spectrum that one moves along instead of as dire opposites. The Chaordic Stepping Stones are strategic steps that can be used as a planning tool when walking down a ‘chaordic path’ with a group. The Eight Breaths of Process Design use the above-mentioned ‘groan zone’ as a base with which to explore and deepen the understanding of divergent/

convergent thinking at each step of organizing an event or designing a process.

In their ethnographic study of facilitators trained with an Art of Hosting approach, Quick and Sandfort (2014) remark that “hosting provides a window into researching how facilitators learn both about discrete techniques, concepts and artifacts *and* about situating their knowledge in overall process designs and particular settings.”

While patterns and frameworks are pretty much used interchangeably in AoH literature, for our present purposes I will distinguish between patterns that I view as offering practitioners a rough road map between theory and practice (or between knowing a dialogical method and applying that knowledge appropriately (Quick and Sandfort, 2014)), and frameworks as a window onto the world; a way of understanding organizations, or even society in general.

Some of these frameworks include Living Systems Theory, the idea that organizations (and the people in them) are living systems (and not machines as they are often structured) and as a consequence naturally self-organizing and unpredictable (“A living systems approach,” n.d.). Two Loops is a roughly sketched-out theory consisting of a drawing with a few lines and some key words that simply illustrates how “as one system culminates and starts to collapse, isolated alternatives slowly begin to arise and give way to the new” (“Our theory of change,” n.d., para. 1). The Cynefin framework is a sense-making model that distinguishes between simple, complicated, complex, or chaotic problems and the appropriate response to each category (The Cognitive Edge, 2010).

A couple of years ago I was facilitating a two-day retreat with representatives of a religious organization that had been founded nearly a century before. In the years that had passed, the organization’s structure, hierarchy, and decision-making system had not changed very much, but needless to say, the entire society in which it operated had changed, and it found itself with a dwindling base of supporters and a crumbling infrastructure. I decided to share with the group the Berkana Institute’s theory of change which they simply call Two-Loops, as I thought it might be a useful framework through which to think about their current challenges

I drew the two loops on a large sheet of paper and went through how the different parts of the loops connected with the key words. The first loop goes up to downwards and is accompanied by the words: stewarding, visioning, hospicing, composting. The second loop goes

from down to upwards and is accompanied by the words: initiating, networking, nourishing, illuminating, transitioning.

I was finishing up my drawing when I heard a participant gasp. “Does this resonate with you?” I asked the elderly woman. “It sure does! We’ve been trying to just keep going and no wonder it’s not working: we’re *in the compost pile!*” A ripple of laughter coursed through the room. “Yes, that’s it!” another participant gleefully agreed, “We are compost! We’re supposed to be using our best to grow new shoots and sprouts not trying to keep the old stuff alive.” The metaphor stayed with us throughout the weekend and even made its way into an arts-based activity where compost heaps sprouting seedlings became a recurring theme. More importantly the framework was useful for participants to shift their understanding of their organization, and now two years later they are shifting the organization itself.

In our casual shorthand about “the groan zone,” Samantha and I are drawing on the Art of Hosting’s offer of patterns to help us understand, communicate, and learn from the context in which we are working. The Art of Hosting community’s practice of articulating and explicating patterns has prompted us to be more explicit in sharing the patterns we draw upon with others and in taking the time to outwardly formulate the patterns we identify in our work, including with the groups we work with.

In *Storycatcher*, Christina Baldwin (2007) writes, “I find myself thinking that the people with whom I most deeply belong are those who are willing to carry the ambiguity of the age, those who are learning how to manage tension in a heartfelt, spiritually imbued manner. I call us the Tribe of the Ambiguous -- anyone can join, just start noticing.” (p. 137) My experience has led me to believe that those who practice the Art of Hosting are very much card-carrying members of the Tribe of the Ambiguous. The Art of Hosting, mired in ambiguity, and anchored in the asking of questions, is a response to the complexity of the issues we are currently facing today. I believe it is a safe bet for me to say that if you ask just about any Art of Hosting practitioner “What is the answer to [insert complex social problem here]?” Their response will invariably be “I don’t know! Let’s figure it out together.”

### **Chapter 3: “When you say the Art of Hosting, it's not really what it is, but what it does that interests me.”**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I share the data I collected from the semi-structured interviews I conducted with experienced Art of Hosting practitioners between October and December 2013. My intention with these interviews was to inquire into how practitioners define the Art of Hosting approach for themselves, how they understand the use of conversation as a core practice in their work, what they believe is required to elicit ‘good’ or ‘meaningful’ conversation from the participants they work with, what concrete practices they use to allow/encourage conversation to emerge, and what impact, if any, do they believe this kind of conversational practice has.

#### **Methodology and ethics**

Between October and December 2013, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six experienced facilitators who self-identify as Art of Hosting practitioners. All interviewees were given a consent form outlining the procedure and conditions to participating in my research prior to the interviews. In the consent form, they were given the choice to reveal their identity or use a pseudonym, whereby I would obscure key details about their identity, and omit any direct references to the location or subject of their relevant work. It is important to note here that every single interviewee waived the option of remaining anonymous or being attributed a pseudonym for the interview. Each opted to use their real name, location, and affiliation when this thesis is published, the general reasoning being that their respective interviews as well as my research are contributions to the Art of Hosting’s global community of practice.

I chose to use a semi-structured approach to my interviews in order to have a consistent way to be able to compare and contrast the responses given in relation to particular themes while still allowing for natural conversation to emerge. I used the exact set of questions submitted with my thesis proposal (see Table 1) and generally asked these questions in the same order in every interview. I allowed myself the liberty to change the order around, skip a question if I felt it had been passively answered, or omit a question if I sensed it was not particularly relevant to the interviewee I was speaking with at the time.

To develop a questionnaire for the interviews I started by examining the key connections (see Appendix) I had made between my understanding of Freire and my understanding of the Art of Hosting. I then formulated two general categories of questions. One category (questions 1 to 9; questions 18-21) focused on delving into the interviewee's understanding of, and perspective on, the Art of Hosting. The other category (questions 10 to 17) was formulated by looking at my "Freire-inspired" themes and finding a way to incorporate these themes into straightforward questions that would still allow interviewees to focus on their own experience with the Art of Hosting

Five of the interviews were conducted in person and one by Skype and each lasted between approximately 25 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the interviewee and later transcribed into written form, as close to word-for-word as possible. As a courtesy, each interview was openly shared back with the respective interviewee in their preferred form (audio file and/or written transcript). The interviewees were not asked for feedback and/or approval of the final transcripts.

I also took notes during each interview using a simple template that listed each question and sufficient space to jot down key words or phrases from each interviewee under the corresponding question. This allowed me to be able to compare and contrast responses at a glance.

I embarked on an in-depth reading of each transcript highlighting relevant responses and coding them according to themes I saw emerging. Some corresponded to my original presuppositions, but some did not. This process was repeated several times for each interview. I followed this by creating a spreadsheet plotting the codes on one axis and the interviewees on the other axis, and 'copy-pasted' the highlighted portions to the relevant cells. This allowed for a simple way to compare and contrast the responses according to the coded themes.

### **Profile of interviewees**

In terms of profile it is to be noted that three of my interviewees were women and three interviewees were men. As a group they spanned an approximate 25 to 30 year age-range from

their late 30s to early 60s and carried significant professional experience in their fields – regardless of when they started to employ the term “hosting” to describe their work.

Their geographic provenance was relatively diverse : Québec; Canada’s East Coast; Canada’s West Coast, the American Midwest; France; and Denmark. It is important to note that all of the interviewees issued from Western culture. Ethnically the interviewees were of predominantly European backgrounds, with one participant having indigenous ancestry, and one interviewee identifying as mixed-race (African-American/European).

As indicated above it is important to note that each interviewee declined the possibility to be interviewed anonymously and/or use a pseudonym. Further, each interviewee practices “hosting” as their profession and regularly contributes their thinking to various public fora (blogs, website, media interviews, etc). In other words, it is quite easy to google my interviewees and learn more about their work and thinking beyond the limited purview of this thesis.

Below I have included the professional bios of each interviewee adapted from their own sites:

Toke Paludan Moeller is co founder and CEO of Interchange, a “for-more-than-profit” company based in Denmark that works across the world. He is a process organizer and host and has been pioneering in the fields of sustainable entrepreneurship, social innovation, participatory leadership, hosting and harvesting strategic conversations that matter, since the early 1970s. Toke is a co-founder of The Flow Game, The Art of Hosting and harvesting conversations and work that matters, and the Warrior of the Heart dojo. (“Toke Paludan Moeller - Short Bio 2015,” n.d.)

Chris Corrigan has spent the last 20+ years working at the intersection between indigenous and non-indigenous systems, community organizations and ways of thinking. Chris is a long time practitioner of Open Space Technology, World Cafe and other participatory methodologies. He has taught the Art of Hosting around the world as a way of supporting people in developing their practices to put hosting conversations at the centre of systemic change, decolonization and community development. (“Team - AoHBtB,” n.d.)

Tuesday Ryan-Hart is a host/facilitator who walked out of the fields of traditional service provision and academics and walked on to become a new kind of community change-maker who partners with community builders around the world. Trained as a psychotherapist, with a BA in

Individual/Family Studies and a Master's in Social Work, Tuesday is an expert in transformational work, specializing in helping individuals, community non-profits, governmental agencies, and organizations of all sizes undergo the changes that will help them grow and become more successful. ("Team - AoHBtB," n.d.)

Nancy Bragard is a Franco-American consultant who accompanies individuals and teams in transition and specializes in bringing teams together from different cultures. Trained in systemic thinking she optimizes change through collaborative practices that allow for the adherence to objectives and long-lasting results. Her facilitation focuses on bringing awareness to the potential challenges of an international environment; the cohesion of multicultural teams; the development of global leadership; preparing managers for the international environment; long-distance project management. (Translated by author from "Nancy Bragard," n.d.).

Tim Merry presents, designs and delivers participatory processes where stakeholder voice is key to creating the systems, structures and services that meet the needs of all involved. Tim is one of the co-founders of the Art of Hosting, has been a supporter and board member of the Berkana Institute and is a co-founder of the Hub South Shore. He is currently part of an entrepreneurial collaborative, called Involve, working with large-scale civic engagement to create citizen led change. ("Team - AoHBtB," n.d.)

Samantha Slade is a process designer, participatory strategist and social entrepreneur. She is co-founder of percolab, a company working in social innovation, and a co-founder of ECTO, a coworking cooperative based in Montreal. Samantha has been working and experimenting with open innovation, change management, and collaborative methods for the past two decades. Samantha accompanies transformational processes, hosts citizen participation initiatives and drives IT projects that empower people – supporting them in innovating their own solutions and growing their working culture. ("Team," n.d.)

### **General observations**

It is to be noted that while the interviewees came from varying backgrounds, especially in terms of geographic provenance, their 'take' on the Art of Hosting was strikingly similar and the language used quite consistent. At no point when conducting, transcribing, or reviewing all six

interviews did I note any opposing perspectives or significantly diverging definitions or understandings.

I did note, however, that my line of questioning quietly informed by Freire's thinking (and my own background in community development) did not seem relevant to at least one interviewee: Nancy Bragard, whose background is primarily in the private sector. Additionally, she was the only one of my participants who I interviewed by happenstance<sup>8</sup> and not because she had been previously identified. Much of Nancy's language during the interview was peppered with words like 'client', 'executive', and 'management', and her concrete examples derived from her experience in the corporate sector. Even though the Freire-related questions were largely left unanswered in this interview I noticed that her overall perspective of the Art of Hosting was consistent with that of the other practitioners. I found this to be an interesting observation that had me wondering about whether and how Freirean thinking would or could relate to the private sector or if this was simply too large of a gap to close. Further her dissimilar experience to the other hosts combined with her similar perspective on the Art of Hosting made the otherwise consistent collective discourse of all six interviewees even more noticeable.

### **The never-ending practice of hosting**

When asked to explain the Art of Hosting the terms "worldview" and "a way of being" were largely shared. Tim further describes this as "things like how am I turning up, how am I choosing to see the world, what is the consciousness in which I am walking in a room, or just walking in my life", while Samantha boils it down to "doing work for the common good from a place of consciousness". The sense that I got from all six interviews was that the notion of 'hosting' is so deeply ingrained within each of them that the line between their professional selves and their personal selves is very fuzzy, and perhaps non-existent. I find this striking considering that for all of these people hosting "is how I make my living and you know that's how I feed my children" (Chris) and "this practice is directly connected to my livelihood" (Tim). Juxtaposed to,

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<sup>8</sup> She happened to be attending the same Art of Hosting training as me as she happened to be in Montreal at that time.

say, the life of a plumber, the impression that I get is that these people are always ‘hosting’ whether on a professional contract or out with friends on a Saturday night, whereas the plumber is not always plumbing. He ‘plumbs’ on a professional contract but probably not on a Saturday night – except, perhaps, if his friend’s sink springs a leak.

For most the sense of “the art of hosting as opposed to Art of Hosting” (Chris) predates their actual involvement with the Art of Hosting. Chris explains

So I think I first became a practitioner of this art, you know, after working with participatory methodologies and you confront a complexity that arises and you confront the emotional responses to that and all of the uncertainty and you realize you need a practice because there is nothing in the user's guide that tells you what to do in this particular situation. So how I am in context initiated me into the practice. I was self-initiated by the world into the practice of it because I needed to understand how to conduct myself in those spaces.

Nancy echoes this sentiment: “it was a rejoicing moment to see that what I had tacitly in me really did exist and I had been using the practices. I found, what is it? I found a hanger to hang my coat on because finally there was something that really corresponded to what... what was purposeful to me.” When asked how she became an Art of Hosting practitioner Samantha offered: “Well, you are. And then you link to the term. [...] And I think there are tons of people that are. Some link to the term and others link to other terms and it doesn't at all matter.” Tim, after stumbling on the same question for a few breaths, simply replied, “I've been a practitioner of the art of hosting, I think, since I was born.” For these ‘hosts’ who were already immersed in facilitation work their connection with the Art of Hosting seems to be an affirmation of what they were already doing. Their link to the Art of Hosting did not change their work, they were already working as facilitators in some capacity, it did however seem to provide a space for them to develop, as noted above, their practice, and connect with others doing the same in a way they could relate to.

Tuesday, however, tells a different story. Unlike the other interviewees who alluded to having ‘found their tribe’, Tuesday first connected to the Art of Hosting community as an activist-who-happened-to-facilitate when she attended a three-day training. Her reaction at the end of the third day when the group was asked how they would use what they had learned was “you guys are

painting a beautiful picture but, no, I have no idea how to insert myself into it." Tuesday had not 'found the hanger' on which to hang *her* coat. Yet, she still ended up becoming not only a practitioner of the Art of Hosting, but eventually one of the 'stewards' that supports others. What shifted?

So they asked us to call an Open Space<sup>9</sup> session on it and three of us called an Open Space session on "What do you do once you leave here?" And out of about 50 people about 20 came to that Open Space session! And, you know... they were... it was lovely, supportive... let's help you figure out what to do with this. But there was a little edge to it as well. Like, we were talking saying something about our tool box and someone said "This is more than tools and you need to understand that!" I was like "Huh?!" That was kind of intense. An Aikido master was there... because of course... there would have to be an aikido master... and then he says to me "Tuesday, you have to realize we are saying all this stuff to you because we need to hear it." And it was a beautiful moment of like him just like bringing everybody back to centre. So that was really nice. It was supportive. It was challenging. The other three things that happened is that Toke said to me: "I'm coming to Columbus next week. Why don't you come and do some work with me?" OK, I'm not a person to kind of say something that's a little bit challenging and then say "Oh no, no, no, no." OK, thank you! You picked up the challenge so I'll come work with you next week and then Chris said to me, soon before I left "I'll mentor you. If you're really interested I'll mentor you." You'd have to ask him why he said that because I don't exactly know what was happening but it was fantastic.

Significant in Tuesday's story is that her initial discomfort was not ignored or challenged, instead she was 'hosted' and invited into conversation about it. . She did not have to formally accept or refuse to join an organization, The many invitations Tuesday was extended: to have a conversation, to engage in work with others, to be mentored were hers to accept or refuse and the practitioner she eventually became was hers to shape.

The word "practice" appeared multiple times in each interview, sometimes referring to the methodologies used in the Art of Hosting as practices, but mostly in the sense that learning to 'host' is an ongoing personal commitment, Nancy calls it a "practice philosophy." Samantha offers: "One of the key premises of Art of Hosting is that spirit of practice. So I'm constantly learning no matter what I'm doing, no matter what I'm good at, no matter where I've got more

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<sup>9</sup> Open Space is a conversational methodology where participants propose and hold conversations on topics, usually related to a key question, and everyone chooses where they want to participate.

experience...” In the same vein, Toke says simply, “all of my life, I have learned through practice. Practice is my teacher.” Chris calls it “the personal practice that's required in the way that an individual human shows up as a host or facilitator.” Tuesday knowingly integrates her social justice background into her work to include both her “activist practices and hosting practices” and emphasizes how each person must develop their own way of hosting: “[my practice] doesn't have to look like Chris' practice or Toke's practice - there is space for MY practice within the community.” While Tim offers that

It's like what am I doing that is keeping me in my practice connected to life. Because if I'm trying to create the conditions for that to happen. If I'm not practicing it within my own inner journey then there is no way I can host it with others, you know? If I am not learning how to sit with my own chaos, my own questions and my own brilliance and my own confusion and my own diversity and my own complex... there is no way I can create the conditions for people to sit with that within a room of ten, fifty, five hundred people. Right?

The overall sense transmitted by the six interviewees was that one is never done learning how to host. Unlike a performance there isn't a ‘practice’ and then a ‘show’, for Art of Hosting practitioners, even the main event – the contracts for which they get paid – is still practice; still an opportunity to learn and to deepen their understanding.

### **Flattening relationships because ‘top-down’ is not the only way**

When I attended my first Art of Hosting training in January 2013 I was struck by the “flatness” of the structure. While there was plenty of charisma in a room chock-full of fascinating characters, the cliché of the charismatic workshop leader was wholly absent. Instead of “taking the mic” the three out-of-town guests (Toke Moller Paludan, Tuesday Ryan-Hart, and Chris Corrigan) were simply introduced as stewards of the Art of Hosting and resource persons for the three days. At each of the three days one of these three would co-host the day with the local organizing team. From my participant perspective, it seemed to me that this was a capacity building exercise: for the most part the local team was “in front” and the stewards seemed to be gently supporting them from behind. Added to this was the open invitation for participants to also step in and “practice” hosting while the stewards were simply available and present at all

times to anyone who wanted to connect with them on each of the three days. This “flatness” was also exemplified in the use of the words “host” and “hosting” to not only define what would traditionally be called workshop leaders, but equally applied to participants, who were called upon to “host themselves” and “host others” during the three days. Unlike most trainings in which I had participated in the past it was almost impossible to distinguish between participants and trainers; the lines between the roles of host, steward and participant were decidedly blurry and this appeared to be quite intentional to me.

My fascination with this “flattening” prompted me to ask several direct and indirect questions intended to suss out whether my perception that the structure of the Art of Hosting event I had intended – and by extrapolation the structure of Art of Hosting events in general – intentionally sought to shift the more traditional leader/led, teacher/student, facilitator/participant dynamics I had the habit of seeing in most trainings and workshops.

Throughout the interviews I picked up on recurrent perspectives of the idea of flattening or equalizing relationships: the need to re-evaluate what we know, what we don’t know, and who knows what, were consistent threads throughout all six interviews.

Samantha considers that the “flattening of relationships” I referred to in my questions “incarnates a different structure, way of being together... and... that allows the person to work it through”. Toke reflects that the ‘flattening’ or equalizing happens through “conversations, even just the vehicle, to allow myself and other humans we begin to learn together and that is the equalizer.” Chris reflects that as an external consultant part of his work is to remind his clients that having conversations about what matters is something they already know how to do. Recounting an example in his own work of witnessing the Art of Hosting having an impact, he shared his client’s perspective after the project was finished: “the reason why it worked was because when we hired Chris, we hired him and we said we need you to come and host these conversations and he said “it sounds like you need to host them yourselves.”” What he shared with his clients was his knowledge around the patterns, processes, and frameworks that provide a stable container for important conversations, but ultimately they were the ones to engage in, hold, and host the conversations.

“Just talking about the host,” says Samantha,

is putting a bit of... the light on only one element of that... the fabric of all that's going on [...] So maybe when all of that is being shared by everybody then we're all doing bits and pieces of the work that needs to be done. So it's not all about the host. It's about sharing all of that together.

Samantha calls this focus on the ‘host’ “a remnant from our current society”, which focuses on who is in front and centre, i.e. the host, facilitator, teacher, etc., whereas she says

it's also the art of organizing, the art of designing, the art of holding field, the art of space and beauty, it's... the arts of a whole bunch of things and yet we talk about hosting so much that we neglect all of the others. So when it's going to be all shared and distributed and held collectively by a group, it's because one of the important things is that hosting comes back down to the role as the same and as important as all the other ones. And... [pause] so yeah, it should be... [pause] the whole concept of this is the participants and this is the facilitator is... is... is... all just to be one day exploded or gradually to move towards building our capacity to move beyond that into another framework.

Toke emphasizes that having meaningful conversations is a skill anyone can learn: “every human being knows. So you don't need to be a professor and have studied fifteen years to find out how to host a conversation that matters. Any kid can do it.” Chris, Samantha, and Toke are highlighting that human beings naturally have the capability and the capacity to be in conversation with one other, and the focus on a central figure can distract from that. It may be a habit that have some forgotten or neglected, or perhaps it is a skill that is simply undervalued or not recognized, yet conversation is an activity that all human beings can engage in and they see that part of their role as practitioners is to remind the people they work with that they already have the capacity to engage in conversation, and that they can certainly learn to host.

### **Beyond the expert: Hosting as not knowing**

The notion of “not knowing” is reflected in the attitude that hosts maintain when it comes to working with groups. In opposition to the commonly expected dynamic that an external consultant comes in with a solution, clear recommendations, or an evaluative formula, Art of Hosting practitioners come in to an organization or group with a posture of “not knowing” and an assumption that it is the people whom they are working with, not for, who best know their

own situations and can generate their own solutions or recommendations given the time and space for meaningful conversation. Chris maintains

when I'm working with a group but there's times where I'm just... I don't know what's going on and I'll ask people. I remember when I first realized that a facilitator was allowed to do that. Because there's this idea that I have to know what's going on and where the process is going next but there's lots of times where I'm just thinking "What the fuck is happening?" and so I just say "Hey, you guys, what should we do?" Which seems unprofessional in a way but it's actually the essence of what it means to join the field.

Tuesday echoes this posture of “not knowing”:

People don't typically bring me in to host for answers that are easy so it's really easy to frame "we actually don't know what to do". So... you know... if we knew what to do we would have solved this hunger problem, we would have solved this homelessness problem. We would no longer have violence against women. We actually don't know what to do. Most people can like see that, they're like "Oh yeah, years of work and we haven't figured it out, we haven't solved it." So there's a little bit of bringing people back to their curiosity and... and... we'll often talk about one person cannot possibly know it all. Just cannot hold the answer.

Bringing participants back to a stance of “not knowing” implies shifting the belief that the “external consultant” has all the answers and working through the uncomfortable and unrealistic expectation that it is not possible to know what is not knowable. Tim Merry uses the expectations around the expert knowledge that participants project unto him to be subversive:

I've turned up the situation and I've been like I'm the expert in process design and bizarrely enough all the people who are used to working in expert fields won't fuck with my process design, you know? [laughter] They all just trust it. It's like "OK, great! He's the expert in process design." And they all end up in this wholly participatory process. [laughter] So on some level you can play with that, you know? But on another level it's just, it's just training and practice. So, when someone comes up and says "Why aren't you... this is the thing that I want you to sort out" My response is always "That's a really important thing, how would you like to take responsibility for that?" So the.. the.. for me the work is that as soon as you're solving someone's problem for them you are disempowering them to solve their own problems.

Samantha Slade brings it back to the notion of simply being human with one another.

I think we should be functioning with human beings as human beings. And that's probably our biggest challenge. Because we think that if someone is this or that we need to adjust this or that. Maybe that's the error that's in there. Maybe because we're

functioning as human beings it doesn't matter. So if I'm functioning with a big director who is in a position of power or if I am functioning with someone who lives on the street - it's all human beings.

Toke relates how our current societal attachment to the role of experts can impede our capacity to be human together:

Before the expert, not even in time, but even before the expertise arises is the human being and I think that maybe if any of us gets attached to the expertise that we have invested in and we are not basically willing to be with other people as citizens or as human beings, it can be a little bit confronting but it's in no way that I feel that I don't have respect for expertise. I have my own expertise. You do something for a long time and you put your heart and mind into it, expertise will grow.

He continues:

So I think that's it important to see that if experts demand that they want to be approached as experts it's a weakness. [...]Then there is this not equal relationship in and nobody wins. So, I have in the sense of when people demand to not be themselves I don't give it any attention. I just keep working with the conditions. I don't try to fix it. I don't like people making decisions on my behalf. So I don't do it to anybody else. Anybody can leave if they don't like what's going on. But, we're not going to change the learning field because one person demands to be treated special. This speciality is that we are human and we can live that humanity. We can.... of course who had hosted hundreds of conversations will have more expertise than the person who is just learning how to do it and will host their first World Café tomorrow morning. Well, both can be respected if you understand where they're at at that particular moment. And that is at least what I'm seeing... to have that clarity. Then it is lovely when expertise is needed you can invite the expert to show up. And then where there is none needed we can turn back to being citizens together.

Tuesday repositions the role of experts as pieces of a larger puzzle:

So the expert model, while it may be helpful and it may be consultative, is not THE answer. And, sometimes we bring in experts. Like this big redesign we are doing with the homelessness system at home, you know, we started off with experts on our initial strategy team. We had research that's been done on the topic we're working on. It's not like a throwing out of experts. Its just saying that's a piece of the puzzle and it's not nearly enough.

When working with groups on complex issues Chris opens the conversation up on the full spectrum of complexity and the need to know THE answer:

I mean I often will stop a process and will discuss the reality of complexity and that none of us know what to do. It would be lovely to have experts and just to do a little reality check are we building an air-conditioning system or are we addressing poverty? Because if we're building an air-conditioning system then I'm definitely not the right guy, but I know a guy who knows everything about that and then we're done. So we can have an expert. But what about addressing poverty: have we ever done it here in this community? No, clearly. Do we know how to do it? No. I don't know how to do it either. So... but maybe we'll learn something about how to do it together. So it's about, it's about... in my hosting work there's a lot of teaching that like, I like I offer these frameworks, and these frameworks are useful to understand, like they're maps and I can understand where I am on the ground and the participants understand we're in this space where we can't know and they're like "Oh yeah, the not knowing!" Sometimes we might have to have a conversation about not what is it that you want answers from the expert, but why?

What Chris is invoking here is that there simply is not a single clear-cut answer to an issue as complex as poverty. Not even the most-renown expert has THE answer. It is essential, rather, to bring participants back to their own knowledge, wisdom, experience, and understanding of their context to determine together what can be developed as possible responses.

### **So when exactly is the expert going to get here?**

The hold of expert culture is so strong that it can be highly uncomfortable and frustrating for the uninitiated to “simply” engage in conversation, to shift away from expecting to be told the “truth” by an expert. “And there is a case-in-point recently,” Samantha Slade illustrates,

when we were doing something and it was about allowing conversations to happen and then somebody in the room was absolutely livid because she wanted a PowerPoint... presentation from folks. And she came like really disgruntled and... [pause] bull-dozed to the point where she thought if she said it loud enough and strong enough and aggressively enough that we would actually shift and all of a sudden pop out a PowerPoint presentation from our pocket. Like... So... confronted she was by it. And so in that case, there is an individual hosting that can be done. At this point this person needs to be individually hosted so that the others... can continue.

Tuesday offers a similar example:

We have a person in one of our projects now, she hates working in this way. She really does just want us to pay an expert to tell us what to do and she makes that known every

single meeting. It's been two years now and everyone is just like "Meh, that's what she has to say." And we'll just get ourselves going. And she keeps showing up! We're doing something right. She keeps coming, she feels good enough to keep coming and we let her say what she needs to say.

The “art” part comes in hosting individuals and groups past whatever blockages they encounter so that they can truly engage with others and participate in the “conversations that matter” so that they may contribute to and/or co-create the solutions/plans/next steps for the issues they are discussing. Yet, sometimes, as in the examples shared by Tuesday and Samantha, not every person is ready or willing to go down this route. For some straying from what is considered the ‘norm’, or from PowerPoint for that matter is destabilizing and they have to decide for themselves whether they will engage or not.

### **Learning by doing (or the medium really is the message)**

A common thread at the heart of many of the responses in all six interviews is the urgency of learning to be in conversation together as whole people. A repeated idea is that we don't know (or nobody really knows) how to solve the world's problems and we need to figure it out together. Perhaps it can be framed as placing a wager: the bet the ‘hosts’ are placing is that by (1) introducing processes, frameworks and ‘powerful questions’ that bring people to interact with each other differently, (2) share their own experiences with others differently, (3) engage with each other's ideas differently, and (4) think about the social context in which they work and live differently, will consequently allow them to come up with unforeseen possibilities for action in their own world. That they will have upped the chances of being able to co-create a world significantly different (and better) than the *status quo* we are presently being offered .

It is a way to survive the breakdown of the current system according to Tim Merry:

we're dealing with at the moment is the collapse of an old paradigm of leadership, you know? This has risen out of the industrial era of an industrial mindset of command and control. You can run things in a mechanical way, you can run your organizations like machines bla bla bla. I mean you know all of this stuff right? And so as one system collapses new ways of thinking are born.

For Samantha Slade the potential impact of the Art of Hosting it is about making a significant choice for a better life as we approach a societal fork in the road:

there's a growing awareness that whatever path we are on as a human species we are just... right now we've taken a fork in the road that's not going to take us anywhere that we can go for too long. At one point that fork will have to go on another path. And... and... part of all this is that switching.... that finding the way forward. In our society in a way that is sustainable for us all. I mean Art of Hosting says it really simply, no? Tending to the grandchildren. You don't have to talk about sustainable development, tending to the grandchildren is a much more livening and connecting way to say it. So yeah, that's it.

For Toke it is the contribution he is making in his “autumn years”:

But, at least in my analysis, one of the qualities that humans have is that we have an incredible capacity to learn through struggle and that learning may be our finest quality. And being in conversation about what matters, that which we don't have any easy answer to. That which concerns the common good and not just each person's little opinion about life and other people and what we think, how we judge everything. But to come into that place where the curiosity, the life of inquiry, awakens our capacity to learn, is an amazing power. It is a power and at this time I feel that we need to be powerful. But not for destruction but for peace, for consciousness, for caring.

The “equalizer”, the “different way of being together”, named earlier, is all about the capacity to learn together. For the Art of Hosting practitioners this means that participants AND experts must show up, bringing who they are and what they know while being ready to roll up their sleeves to think together and learn together. Samantha emphasizes the importance of recognizing that participants always bring in their prior experience:

Here is just a really simple example: when people come in and go "oh say, today we're gonna have..." I mean you can say anything: today we're gonna have an open space or today we're going talk about the topic of... I don't know... maple trees. And you start talking to everybody in the room as though they are all blank slates who've never had the experience before.

“If we're hosting well,” says Tuesday, “than hopefully their experience is informing every bit of the conversation, every bit of the outcome, every bit of the prioritizing, every bit of the action planning, all of that is welcome on a number of levels.”

Tim Merry frames it this way:

It's inviting us to turn up with all of our brilliance: bring everything you've got, bring all of your expertise, bring all of your insight, bring your wicked questions, bring all of your discernment, bring all of your doubt, bring it all. But do not be attached to any of it as the whole truth. [laughter] Right? So it's like: bring it all but don't be attached to it as the whole picture or the whole truth. Because as soon as you do you are undermining our capacity to problem-solve.

Nancy Bragard, who works almost exclusively in corporate settings frames her work with the Art of Hosting as creating a practice zone:

It just plain isn't a top-down process whereby we are going to teach them something. We're *not* going to teach them and they *are* going to learn by doing... in a safe environment in which mistakes can be made and nobody expects them to be perfect. Perfection doesn't exist anyway. So, I know and I can coach them and I'll be at their back but I'm not going to teach them. To me it's just *antinomique*, it's contradictory to teach participatory methodologies.

In Samantha Slade's above example she illustrates how our conventional way of functioning in workshops, trainings and other learning events is for the expert/teacher/facilitator to give, transmit, or transfer information regardless of what participants may or may not already know – in essence to in Freirean-speak 'name the world' for others. Throughout the interviews a recurring motif is that one of the fundamental intentions or motivations of those who practice the Art of Hosting is to hack this default operating system. Toke reflects that the focus on sharing out the skills to hold and host conversations is so that “ people don't get stuck in being participants but can become contributors and co-creators of the solutions that are needed. “ Tim Merry distills the need for conversations that matter to a survival skill:

If we don't learn how to be in good conversation with each other we are quite simply not going to be able to respond to the complexity and scale of challenges we are faced with, whether that's as a family, as an organization, as a community. As a region, as a nation, as a species. If we don't learn how to talk to each other we are just not going to find the way forward. I mean it's a survival skill at this point. Yeah?

This work of developing this “survival skill” by having ‘conversations that matter’ has a two-fold purpose: one is, of course, to address, using participatory methodologies, whatever topic they are meeting about in accordance with the intention of the meeting. However, the other

purpose, and for the ‘hosts’ this may be the most important one, is that by participating in a highly-participatory process they are learning *how* to dialogue by engaging *in* dialogue that requires people to, as Time noted above, “bring all of your expertise, bring all of your insight”. And, that by learning how to dialogue in that setting, participants will carry this skill into their other interactions and settings in a way that will generate more effective change in the world.

### **Learning to learn together**

The strongest theme that emerged out of each individual interview and can be seen as a pattern when the interviews are analyzed as a collective voice is the notion of “learning”. This is apparent in the reflection that to truly be a practitioner of the Art of Hosting a “host” must be a dedicated learner. Chris offers:

I think it's one of the markers of quality hosting that the host doesn't know what's going to happen either. If the host knows what's going to happen, I'm not interested in that meeting and very few other people are. So I think the ability for us to learn together, to co-learn is really important. That happens when we really nail it.

Samantha furthers this line of thinking:

I am a learner as a foundation so there's a level of humility and... [pause] and Art of Hosting, really, as an approach when you sit back and you look at it: sure we're giving space for each human being to be a human being together differently which is really great. [...] Because the learning premise means we can step into inquiry instead of judgement. The learning premise means about being without... it's everything. It's the linker.

To be in learning with others implies, as illustrated above, breaking down the barriers between the us/them dichotomy (or expert/non-expert, facilitator/participant, teacher/student) we explored earlier, and creating a “we”. Toke offers:

And when we learn together, it means we don't know the answer. Let's learn. Let's co-create the answer together. Let's learn about how we can make this, find a solution to this problematic. And so I think it's all journeys and I don't... To me [learning is] the finest relationship I can have with another human being.

From a participant perspective the Art of Hosting is about both learning to be in conversation together and, perhaps more simply, learning how to learn together. For Chris the whole point is:

a way of being that is intended to activate learning fields in humans, individuals, and communities, organizations also and it's a way of hosting and harvesting some conversations that matter to look at the... collective intelligence.

This focus on learning informed not only every interview but was reflected back in the how multiple questions were answered. Whether asked about their own relationship to the Art of Hosting, the purpose they say in their hosting work, or how participants engage with hosting practices, most of the responses were but variants on the theme of learning. The learning and co-learning of hosts and participants can be argued to be the essence of the Art of Hosting itself.

## Chapter Four: The art of openly conspiring

### Introduction

In May 2014, over a year after this research project had started, and many months after having completed my interviews with Art of Hosting practitioners, I packed into a car with my colleagues Paul and Samantha and drove fourteen hours to Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia, in order to attend a three-day event entitled Art of Hosting: Beyond the Basics. By that time I was utterly convinced that the Art of Hosting was indeed Freire's 'lost tribe', and that hosting practice was, in fact, radical pedagogy in disguise. I hadn't quite realized yet, as I describe in Chapter Three, that the Art of Hosting was not a 'thing'.

"My expectation when travelling to Mahone Bay was to experience radical pedagogy to the *nth* degree," I wrote in an email to Chris Corrigan, one of the hosts of Beyond the Basics, a few weeks after the event. During the three days I had come face-to-face with the actuality that the expectations I had projected on to the Art of Hosting were of my own making - and not necessarily shared by more than a few other people who already subscribed to a world view similar to mine.

In the same email to Chris (which was a response to an invitation for feedback) I expound on the disconnect I felt between my own expectations and what was on offer: exploring the themes that the four hosts had identified as the 'learning edges' of their own work. Namely, depth, breadth, power, and friendship. "During that session," I continue,

I got some clarity on what I was struggling with: as hosts the four of you were bringing content based on your own experience. However, the "content" of your reflections is of secondary interest to me, what I *am* interested in is that you *are* inquiring into your practice in a very deep way and that inspires me to inquire into mine.

The gap between you sharing your experience and me relating it to mine is the appropriate space for an experience that connects the two and helps propel me forward in my own understanding of the world and my place in it. In essence, it is an opportunity for radical pedagogy. [...]

Again what is interesting to me is not what you are inquiring about but the act of inquiry itself. I'm not thinking about power, breadth, depth, and friendship. Interesting enough as topics but not my main focus. I am thinking about shared knowledge, displacing expertise, boldness, and the commons. And I want to learn more about how you are

thinking about your issues as a possible way to think deeper about mine. In my view, the main point of you sharing your inquiries is to act as a springboard that gives each participant an *elan* (I don't know the word in English) to dive into theirs. (Hunt, 2014)

Chris's response exemplified the readiness to dialogue and the open-spiritedness I have come to associate with Art of Hosting practitioners:

I'm really glad you were able to articulate these observations using the radical pedagogy framework. It gives a lot of coherence to what others may also be feeling, great fodder for me to think about and for our emerging design. [...] For us its about power and depth and breadth and friendship. For others it could be about hosting radical pedagogy or deepening personal practice or whatever. I'd love it if this offering inspired you guys to offer a similar offering in the areas of your own expertise and learning edge. Your team is brilliantly equipped to offer something on the Art of Hosting the Radical Pedagogy of the Commons or something! In others words, I'd love it if BtB was seen as an invitation to share multiple "advanced practice" offerings out there, connected together, learning from one another. (Corrigan, 2014)

And just like that I realized that there wasn't going to be a 'big reveal' or magical signposts that illuminated the path from Freire to the Art of Hosting. Chris had gently, but firmly, bounced the ball back into my court. A version of this situation has repeated itself several times over in the last three years: I speak to an AoH practitioner about my project and the links I see between the Art of Hosting and Freire and they enthusiastically respond along the lines: "Wow, that is super interesting! I can't wait to read what you write." It has become obvious to me that if a connection between Freire and the Art of Hosting is to be made, the burden is on me to do so. And, given the open source nature of the Art of Hosting network, it is completely my prerogative to propose a Freirean framework to the AoH community, and up to the individual members of the community to decide for themselves whether they resonate with what I have to say, or not.

In this chapter I use my own practice as a facilitator, a host, a designer of learning experiences, and as a member of a learning organization to articulate the connections I see between Freire and the Art of Hosting and how they are manifested in my everyday work and practice. And, while I find myself drawing on both the Art of Hosting community and on my understanding of Freire's ideas, the two have yet to merge in my mind. As such, I often find myself turning to the inspiring work of author and activist Brian Murphy. I have benefitted

greatly from both Brian's writing and his conversation over the past 18 years, and often find myself delving into his ideas to help me clarify my own.

### **Choosing hope over the psychology of inertia**

One of the things that I take for granted is the belief that we are in the midst of a man-made<sup>10</sup> crisis of mind-staggering proportions. Reinsborough (2004) offers, in my view, the most complete and concise definition of the issues we have been struggling with for decades and decades now:

global crisis — the present time in the history of planet earth, characterized by the systematic undermining of the planet's life support systems through industrial extraction, unlimited growth, the commodification of all life, and emergence of global corporate rule. Symptoms include: accelerating loss of biological and cultural diversity, the deterioration of all ecosystems, the destabilization of global ecology (climate change, soil erosion, biocontamination, etc.), growing disparities between rich and poor, increased militarization, ongoing patterns of racism, classism, and sexism, and the spread of consumer monoculture. Part of the endgame of 200 years of industrial capitalism, 500 years of white supremacist colonization, and 10,000 years of patriarchal domination. (p. 208)

About two years ago, I sat front-row in one of the university's auditoriums, taking notes on my computer as author and climate change specialist, Thomas Homer-Dixon, delivered a keynote address to the Concordia community. I wasn't paying very much attention to the meaning of his words. Instead, my fingers were flying across the keyboard making sure these words ended up on the screen as I focused on capturing as much content as I could for a follow-up blogpost I was supposed to write for the sponsoring department. Suddenly, I realized that my typing had caught up with his speech and he was standing silently on the stage. I looked up to see his eyes gleaming with tears and he was visibly choked up. He had been speaking about the environmental and social impact that climate change would have on the world in 80 years. A not so distant time, he told us, in which he would be dead but that his now small children would be elderly and might require care. Care that would be quite difficult to assure in the future he

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<sup>10</sup> I deliberately do not write human made.

projected would happen if we continue on the societal path we are on, in relation to greenhouse gas emissions.

I sat there stunned and lost my thread of typing. My children were tiny - babies still - and I was currently missing their bedtime to hear this man speak of how their future was bleak and dismal. My mother's heart ached for my children and for his as well. If this man who was an expert in his field, who knew more about how climate change and how the damage can be shifted than most, who had a voice, the power to publish, a respected pulpit from which to plead his case... If *this* man felt powerlessness at the thought of his octogenarian children, I did not know where to find hope.

“Social change,” says Murphy (1999),

is impeded not only by the extrinsic dilemma of social reality - which, in fact, is precisely what we seek to change; it is critically impeded also by the intrinsic dilemma of individual despair and perceived powerlessness, and the concurrent psychology of inertia. Just as the activist individual is the critical agent of social change, so the individual rendered powerless and inert is a critical barrier to social change.

Most of us, when faced with the experience we have been discussing, pose a question to ourselves: ‘I live in an irrational world bent on self-destruction; how do I act to change this world?’ This formulation focuses on the external, and underscores our individual powerlessness. But suppose we frame the problem another way: ‘I am dissatisfied with the world and my relation with it; how do I act to become satisfied?; This is a more powerful and useful formulation. It is self-centred, focusing on self rather than on some objective - and overwhelming - fault with the world. (p. 14)

Murphy continues, “the starting point is the premise that all action is ultimately ‘selfish’ – that is ‘self’-centered – and aimed at maintaining or achieving health.” (p. 15). In other words what is needed is a selfish concern for our health. A selfish individual concern which takes into account the global interdependence we are caught in. Lest one dismiss Murphy's suggestion as overly focused on the self and not on the world that requires change, it should be known that he is a (charmingly curmudgeonly) lifelong activist who earned his stripes in the streets of several Latin American countries standing shoulder to shoulder, in solidarity and in struggle, with

regular people in the midst of brutal political wars. In *Transforming ourselves, transforming the world: An open conspiracy for social change*, Murphy tells of feeling overwhelmed and hopeless by the despair and suffering he was witnessing. “I must have looked very, very serious, and humourless,” he tells us,

because the women laughed and chided me, and asked me why I was visiting them if I had nothing to say. Then the old woman told me that I should relax and enjoy the evening with them, and stop my frowning. ‘Don’t feel sorry for us,’ she said: ‘We are alive, and we will survive. You are welcome to be with us, but only if you can enjoy our place with us and see what there is to celebrate in our simple lives’.

‘Are you happy?’, she then asked. I responded that I didn’t think so; what was there to be happy about? She replied that if she had what I had, she would be very happy, and would enjoy it every day. ‘Do not be ashamed of what you have,’ she said. ‘Enjoy it! That is what you owe to us. To enjoy, and then to share your joy with us. We do not need your sadness, or your shame.’

We had quite a conversation then - about home, and family, and children, and the war, and struggle. But the beginning of the conversation will always be with me: a gift, a lesson, offered to me who had so much, from an old woman who had so little, but who had more to give than I could have imagined until I met her. From that day I was pledged whenever I felt despair to defeat it with a celebration of the life I had, and the courage to be, and to live, that she has shown me. Her gift was a gift of life.

This is the real meaning of struggle, and if we have the wisdom and the will, we can sustain each other by celebrating ourselves and, and the struggle - personal and political - that defines our being and our lives. (pp. 11-12)

In my work and in my life, I have appropriated Murphy’s question as my own: I am dissatisfied with the world and my relation with it; how do *I act* to become satisfied? Despite our undeniable global crisis, I refuse to accept dissatisfaction with the world as a permanent condition. To me that is giving in to hopelessness and that is a path of weakness. One of the many things I have learned from spending a decade-and-a-half working and learning with the likes of Brian Murphy, Lance Evoy, and Mireille Landry at the Institute, is that I can choose whether my politics will simply be one of *opposition* to that with which I am dissatisfied (and sometimes opposition is indeed appropriate), or one of *proposition* in which I conscientiously

piece together the person I want to be, and the world I want to live in. Like Freire (2004), “I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream.”

### **Empathy is not experience**

When I was 25 years old, I became a Youth Ambassador for the Youth Mine Action Ambassador Program (YMAAP), one of the many programs developed in the wake of the Ottawa Treaty<sup>11</sup> banning anti-personnel landmines. Fresh from my wedding ten days beforehand, I travelled to Ottawa and Quebec City to undergo weeks of intensive training to learn about landmines: why they are in the ground; the scope of the worldwide problem<sup>12</sup>; the kind of injuries they induce in mine victims; the impact they have on communities; what is being done about it; why landmines are banned by the Ottawa treaty; and what ordinary people in Canada could do to help<sup>13</sup>. Much of the learning was theoretical, but understanding that this was a harsh, literally debilitating reality for so many people was intensely upsetting to me. As part of my training, I went to Cambodia where I visited minefields, de-mining activities, rehabilitation hospitals, work projects for mine victims, and humanitarian aid agencies. I traveled across the country with other ‘youth ambassadors’ and we spoke with, and listened to, so many people who were directly or indirectly affected by the ten million landmines that were still immersed in Cambodian soil all these years after the war had ended.

Upon my return, my job was to give presentations about the landmines issue, why it is important, and why people in North America should be concerned about it. I gave hundreds of presentations to groups of all ages. I did radio interviews. I appeared on a number of TV news shows. I had articles written about me. Over those months I started noticing a pattern that disturbed me, especially when I talked about what I saw in Cambodia: the people I presented to, or who interviewed me, were making the issue about *me*. Never mind the million of landmines,

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<sup>11</sup> The full name is the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction*

<sup>12</sup> I still remember the 2000 statistics: approximately 110 million landmines in about 100 countries.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on landmines and the Ottawa Treaty visit: <http://www.minesactioncanada.org/>

the thousands of victims, the missing limbs, the ruined lives, the deminers who literally risked life and limb, the brave individuals who were living with this reality every day...none of that seemed to matter. What people really seemed to want was a hero. And there I was, fresh-faced, passionate, handy with facts, stats, soundbites and photo ops - I even had my own case of dummy mines. An article in *The Gazette* appeared with the headline “She Tackles Ticking Time Bombs” and a 5” x 5” close-up of my face; little kids said they wanted to grow up to be brave like me; adults would congratulate me for my heroism. I was overwhelmed and distraught by this misplaced admiration.

I was very clear in all of my presentations that I *visited* people who removed landmines, I *saw* minefields, I *met* mine victims. I did *not* clear landmines, live near a minefield, nor was I a mine victim. All I did was hop on a plane, stay in a comfy hotel and learn about the landmines issue. Yet, when people heard me talk there was an immediate need to put a heroic face to the problem, and since my face was simply there, it was the first one attached. I was freaked out by this hero-like vision people had of me, I felt like a fraud, like I was somehow misleading people. I did not believe in the hero-figure projected on to me. I had met real heroes who have put their life on the line for others, and even those real heroes didn’t want to be seen as heroes. I soon realized that it was up to me to choose *what version of me* to believe in: I could choose to believe my own hype, or I could try to wave it off graciously and gracefully, and use whatever voice I was being given to focus on the real issues of (1) raising money for mine victims and de-mining activities, and (2) generating enough public interest so that additional signatory countries would join the Ottawa Treaty.

I am all too aware that, despite the challenges that life has thrown at me over the years, I have lived, and continue to live, a safe, secure, comfortable life. I have never been afraid of stepping into my own backyard lest one of my limbs be torn off. I do not know the strain of hunger. I have never experienced the constant fear of violence. I am not familiar with the crushing weight of poverty. I am immeasurably grateful for this: I have never had to face the oppression of so many, too many, women and men in this world.

I have long been uncomfortable with how easy it can be to confound empathy with experience when it comes to questions of oppression. Just because I get sad feelings when I see

something terrible in the world, just because I rage at injustice, just because I cry at the senselessness of human cruelty, does not make these experiences mine. I can stand with others but I cannot speak for them. I can hold space for a person's story to be heard but I cannot, as Freire would say, name the world for them. I can travel across the world to go 'help' others in an oppressive situation but at the end of the day I still have a Canadian passport, a safe place to go home to, access to healthy food, and an RRSP.

The divergence between empathy and experience also manifests itself in my personal life: while my existence has been deeply intertwined with that of my husband's for the past twenty-three years, while we have forged deeply interconnected identities as a result of each being the other's constant companion, while we regularly empathize with our respective life experiences, we are not the same person, and do not have the same experiences. I have no idea what it is to navigate through life as a black man, nor does he know what it is to be a white woman. And, neither of us know what it is to experience life as our 'mix and match' children. I am acutely aware of this (and so is he). My deep-seated empathy, and indeed personal concern, for his experience does not make his experience mine.

And, so it becomes *my choice* of how I spend my empathy, and how I leverage my experience. I have spent my adult life trying (often not succeeding and sometimes miserably failing) to make wise, responsible choices in the spheres in which I have agency and decision-making power so that the positive impact I have on the world can 'run in the black', in accounting-speak. This can be as simple as opting to buy fair-trade coffee, as challenging as trying to gently shift the (shockingly) patriarchal mindset of the female members of my extended family, or as complex (to me) as trying to dismantle the capitalist model of doing business from my teeny-tiny patch of grass.

Either by design or by force of circumstance - I am really not sure of which - I have become a convener of conversations, better known as a facilitator. That is my trade, my vocation. This is the practice I have chosen with which to 'do good' in the world. I tried the issue-based activist path, but focusing on changing a specific problem is not where my talents lie. My most effective work has been when I can connect people together, and support others in doing what they need to do: I have a knack for asking uncomfortable questions. I can be quite insightful. I

can ‘hold space’ for a group that has difficulties to work out. I can remain equanimous in the midst of difficult situations. I can support individuals through difficult collective conversations. Most importantly, I feel deep in my belly that taking the time to thoughtfully, caringly, and perhaps even daringly, think, reflect, speak, learn, and make sense of our individual experiences, our collective context, and the structure of the world with each other is crucial. And perhaps this is why I resonate so strongly with Freire’s *propos* that dialogue is an existential necessity.

### **Philosophical grounding and emergent thinking**

Writing is necessary action. Writing must be respected, supported, appreciated. Writing manufactures understanding. There is a deficit in understanding. Understanding dampens the hell that is hate. Hate decays, writing reanimates. Writing fosters discussions. It opens locked doors, allows us to ponder perceptions outside of our own. Writing frames better possibilities, incites a hunger for them, eradicates apathy. (Matti, 2016, para. 2)

Paulo Freire wrote. A lot. He wrote and co-wrote over 20 books, he authored many articles and was a dedicated letter-writer too. At any given time, a half-dozen of his book can be found on my bookshelf, on my nightstand, or in my backpack. For the most part his books are thin volumes. These should be literary snacks for me as I am a voracious reader and have been known to tear through dauntingly large volumes in mere days. Yet, I have only completed one of Freire’s books<sup>14</sup>. It seems that I cannot read much more than three pages of any of his books without needing to pause, think about something, write down a quote, read a passage out loud to my husband (which invariably leads to a long conversation), or take a photo of a specific paragraph and text it to my colleague Samantha.

When I read Freire, it seems as though every passage drips with significance. I find myself reading and re-reading entire sections. I turn to Freire when I am disenchanted with the state of the world; when I feel a knot in my gut because I sense oppressive dynamics in the world

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<sup>14</sup> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

that I can't quite name.<sup>15</sup> Falling into Freire helps me re-situate myself, gather my bearings, gently untie the knot. Freire can be hard to read: I recall TAing for an undergraduate Philosophy of Education class and observing the students, most in their early 20s, struggle with reading the assigned chapter from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. They tripped over the lengthy passages, were confused by the ideas, often put off by the dense language, and couldn't quite figure out how this fit into their life, or their experience of education. But when it clicked, it clicked. One young woman confided to me: "This is the most important thing I've ever read. This explains *everything!* How has no one told me about this before?"

Macedo (2000) recounts:

Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* gave me a language to critically understand the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hopes and "deferred" dreams that are part and parcel of living a borrowed and colonized cultural existence. Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* also gave me the inner strength to begin the arduous process of transcending a colonial existence that is almost culturally schizophrenic: being present and yet not visible, being visible and yet not present. [...] Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* gave me the critical tools to reflect on, and understand, the process through which we come to know what it means to be at the periphery of the intimate yet fragile relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. (p. 11)

Unlike Macedo, I did not read Freire as a 'colonized young man'. I read Freire as a youngish woman in a patriarchal society. "Self-depreciation," Freire (2000) tells us,

is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often they hear that they are good for nothing,

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<sup>15</sup>I have found myself increasingly applying my own style of Freirean analysis to the world around me. A simple example from pop culture: when the controversy over Formation, pop-star Beyoncé's video, recently erupted, with one camp rejoicing in its 'pro-blackness' and the other castigating it as 'anti-whiteness', I did not understand the fuss. This seemed like a non-issue to me: a pop-star puts out a song that is clearly about her own identity and a bunch of people who do not share in this identity (and whom the video is not about) are offended. Remembering this passage from Freire (2000) helped me reflect on how: "dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming – between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them (p. 88)."

I was immediately able to reframe my understanding of this story: a (black) pop-star 'names the world' and (some white) people "committed neither to the naming of the world, nor to the search for truth, but rather to the imposition of their own truth" (p. 89) freak out because they do not wish this naming. For there to be dialogue around the issues presented in Beyoncé's video – instead of only polarized debate – it is essential for her right to name the world for herself be wholly accepted. The backlash happened because, as Allen (2016), a blogger for Teen Vogue (!) remarks, "Freire warned us that, for those in power, any adjustment in the name of justice feels like oppression. By nature of being white, you don't have to think about yourself. You just are." (para. 6)

know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything - that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive - that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (p. 63)

These words seared into my mind and made clear the deep-seated discomfort that I harboured of simply *not being good enough*. My sense of 'good enough' had not been generated through my own experiences alone but had been passed down by a family involuntarily steeped in sexism, and governed by rigid gender roles (which I did not easily fit); and a society where white males are the 'default' person and anything else is deriving from the norm. Freire invited me to examine my 'limit-situations':

humans [...] because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world - because they are conscious beings - exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom. As they separate themselves from the world, which they objectify, as they separate themselves from their own activity, as they locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations with the world and others, people overcome the situations which limit them: the limit-situations. Once perceived by individuals as fetters, as obstacles to their liberation, these situations stand out in relief from the background, revealing their true nature as concrete historical dimensions of a given reality. (p. 99)

Freire not only names the external conditions that give rise to oppressive realities in the world, he situates the oppressed and the oppressor in an ever-entwined struggle, and rigorously examines the internal dynamic that each experiences in reaction to the other and to their own situation. Like for Macedo, reading Freire gave me critical tools for reflection and a philosophical grounding - a roadmap of sorts - with which to do the internal work to transform my own limit-situations, and by which I could recognize the oppressed/oppressor dynamics at play in others.

The diligence with which Freire recorded his thoughts, his ongoing analysis, and his commentary on the world around him has had a double-edged impact. Like for me, like for Macedo, and countless others as apparent by the vast scholarship dedicated to Freire, his writing has provided a beacon for many seeking to understand the interplay between individual agency and the dominant power structures and forces of our respective times. As explored in Chapter 1, Freire was anything but unchanging: he demanded to be recreated and reinvented according to the context of place and time (Torres, 1988) Nevertheless the act of writing (and printing on

paper no less) has a certain immutability to it. The writer's ideas might change, he himself might change, but for better or worse, his original statements are there - printed in hardcopy, black on white.

The Art of Hosting, on the other hand, has come of age in the time of digital immediacy, permanently editable blogs, social networks, and collaborative platforms propelling short-form content that floats around the web - pulsated by 'searches', 'likes', 'shares' and algorithms. The written legacy of the Art of Hosting is being typed up - blurb by blurb, blog by blog, article by article - by many, many different writers. This 'lego-block' approach to creating an explanatory bibliography for the Art of Hosting allows for a constant emergence of new ideas, new interpretations, and new angles that can be combined in multiform ways. It also opens up who gets to have a turn on the soapbox: from the one-time participant, to the seasoned practitioner, to the thoughtful academic, each person has equal opportunity to voice their views or share their practices with the widest possible interpretation of the Art of Hosting community. While this seemingly democratic practice lends itself to assuring that a heterogeneity of perspectives is permanently on offer, this multiplicity of voices can easily be cacaphonic - there is no single, clear, rigorous, well-argued elucidation of the Art of Hosting.

As with Freire, this reality has a double-edged impact: on one hand the ever-changing abundance on offer prevents the idea of the Art of Hosting from being mummified in the confines of a book - there is no primary text, so the ideas and practices and inspirations that define the Art of Hosting can keep shifting and changing based on who is doing the writing and the interest that it is generating. On other hand, the lack of a canonical reference precludes the formulation of a strong and clear definition or an intellectual rallying point that serves to guide reflection and practice.

I turn to Freire when I am looking for philosophical grounding. I turn to one of the many Art of Hosting-related online platforms or blogs when I am searching for a resource, for an idea, for a process, for a framework that can help me think through a knot I perceive in my work with groups, because I know that with so many people attaching themselves to the assumptions inherent in the Art of Hosting, I am bound to find something useful. In Chapter 2, I wrote of how I shared 'two loops theory' with a group as I had a hunch it might be useful given their current

situation and their subsequent relief at being able to name their predicament (“we’re in the compost!”) and situate it within a larger pattern (“now we have to grow newness from this compost”). My learning of two-loops theory came from 1) having it quickly sketched out for me by an experienced Art of Hosting practitioner; 2) watching a video offering a more extensive explanation; 3) reading all of the material (all blog posts) I could find on it; and 4) translating all of the terms into French - which meant I really had to think through each word to ensure that I properly understood what I was going to share.

In this specific example, the Art of Hosting community, dispersed as it may be, supported me by offering up an accessible and understandable visual framework that I could easily adapt to the needs and context of the group with whom I was working. My understanding of Freire gave me the awareness that while I could share ‘two loops’ with the group, it was not my place to make sense of it for them. I never told them that they were “in the compost” - the idea had not even occurred to me. They named their view of the world, as filtered by the two-loops framework, and were able to perceive from it their ‘limit-situation’ (being in the compost) and the untested feasibility (Freire, 2000), the possible spheres of action, that naming this situation revealed. As I wrote in Chapter 2, this framework continues to resonate with this group as they 1) continue to use it as a reference point, 2) have used the premise embodied in ‘two loops’ to think differently about how to address and transform their situation, and 3) are currently piloting initiatives in this spirit.

Had I used the same framework in a directive manner, what I term “consultant mode”, I could have followed steps such as 1) analyze the situation ahead of time; 2) present the framework; 3) present my analysis of where (I believe) they are situated in relation to the ‘two loops’, and 4) make recommendations for action on how they could transition from ‘loop 1’ to ‘loop 2’. This may have resulted in an interesting conversation but ultimately it would have still been *my* naming *their* world *for* them. Would they still have taken the framework to heart and as a springboard for action had I presented it this way? I don’t know. I can only speculate that the act of creating space for dialogue, and for their own naming of the world in relation to a new perspective being offered was more impactful because it emanated from them and both the analysis of their limit-situation and the identification of their untested feasibilities belonged to

them. My dialogical approach was consistent with the Art of Hosting assumptions, my Freirean analysis helped me both ground my thinking, and trust that by *not* having the answers I was being more useful to the group.

### **The meeting of assumptions**

As I noted in Chapter Two, it is just about impossible to ascertain how many Art of Hosting practitioners there are around the world, never mind the conditions under which they are living and working. Yet, I submit that no matter their sphere of influence and activity - or mine - none of us can lose sight that, though our immediate concern may be with the here-and-now of our specific situation, we also are living in, and shaped by, a world in crisis. Even if oppression is not our direct experience of the world, even if this concept seems distant and abstract, we are, every single one of us, the products (be it oppressor or oppressed) of this world culture.

I do not know, and will not be so bold as to guess, whether Art of Hosting practitioners the world over have an explicit analysis of oppressed/oppressor dynamics, or are able to accurately and conscientiously position themselves on the ‘oppression metric’. My hunch is that some can and some can’t. I will venture to say, however, that many, if not most, would resonate with Freire’s gift of seeing dialogue as an existential necessity. And in the many Art of Hosting practitioners I have met over the last three years, a significant amount are using their hosting practice as a direct way of addressing seriously complex and complicated issues the world over.

Some, like Chris Corrigan, are hosting with local indigenous communities to work through some of the most serious issues affecting First peoples across Canada. Others, like Nancy Bragard are bringing Art of Hosting practices to bare in stringently hierarchical corporate settings in hopes of introducing respectful, human-centred ways of working together. Some, like Tuesday Ryan-Hart host groups composed of marginalized individuals and powerful decision-makers in the spirit of ‘shared work’ with each contributing their knowledge and experience to address homelessness in the community in which they live and work. Others, like Tim Merry are engaging as hosts in highly participatory, long-term, multi-stakeholder processes to shape community infrastructures. Some, like Toke Paludan Møller, are using the wisdom of their ‘autumn’ years and the sharpness that comes with decades of hosting dialogue on tough issues to

work on the inside of such such seemingly immutable structures as the European Commission. Others, like Samantha Slade are combining hosting practice with radical pedagogy to facilitate encounters between theorists working on the commons as a viable operating system for the next economy, and ‘ordinary folks’ stewarding shared resources - resulting in two-way knowledge transmission, in-depth reflection, and the real-life prototyping of alternative economy projects.

In Chapter Two, I named a series of shared assumptions I project onto the Art of Hosting community. Namely, that 1) we are living a crisis of immense complexity; 2) finding appropriate solutions requires us to shift our thinking; 3) dialogue enables us to access collective intelligence; and 4) we can identify and learn from recurring patterns in our work. I offer that at the core of Paulo Freire’s work these are passingly similar assumptions to those of the Art of Hosting – albeit written with very different language and in a different place and time, they are still applicable to the organizational, societal, and indeed global, challenges we face today. Namely, 1) we are living a crisis of oppression and dehumanization; 2) only the oppressed can liberate themselves and their oppressors as well; 3) dialogue is an existential necessity 4) it is essential to understand the internal conditions that allow (or prevent) a person to transcend their situation.

Though these assumptions do share some similarity, they are not of the same scope. On one hand, I have a hard time imagining Freire disagreeing with any of the assumptions implicit in the Art of Hosting: complexity reigns, thinking needs to shift, dialogue is key, we can constantly learn from our learning. On the other hand, I would venture to say that most Art of Hosting practitioners would also agree that the assumptions I draw from Freire’s work are a valid interpretation of the world. However, it most probably does not reflect their direct, and specific, experience of the world. The principles underpinning Freire’s philosophy are of an incredible subtlety, and the result of decades of rigorous thinking. He masterfully relates the internal state of an individual to the state of the world, and he does so in a way that make me (and apparently many others - see Macedo, 2004) feel like I can apply his thinking to my life right now - at this very moment. The Art of Hosting remains to me a useful network, a compelling set of assumptions, and a way of connecting with new ideas.

Comparing a focused body of work that emanated from the mind of one dedicated soul to

that of a decentralized network is naively simplistic at best, and disingenuous at worse. From conversations where I have been privileged to witness the depth of their thinking I venture to say that I would dearly love to see a Tuesday Ryan-Hart, a Samantha Slade, or a Chris Corrigan test the rigour of their ideas, and write literal volumes about their experience in the *art of hosting* (note the lowercase lettering), and share it with the world - as Freire did.

### **“It’s all going to crash if we don’t learn to collaborate”**

There is so much happening in the world right now that is tragic, grave, insanely complex and staggeringly beautiful. I want to talk about these things I don’t always understand with people who think differently than me. I want conversations where I don’t know the outcome. Intense, imaginative, authentic conversations. I want conversations where no one takes a "stand" but everyone listens and learns and has a voice. I want to be influenced into a new way of thinking. (Hunt, 2008)

The French word *sens* carries significance that the English translation “sense” simply does not. *Sens* can mean the senses, to make sense, to mean, to have meaning, and direction. *Sens* can be used in a way that evokes multiple meanings. *Le sens de mon travail* can be interpreted as “the sense/meaning/direction of my work.” My career-long focus on dialogue is a search for *sens* so that “the work”, whatever it happens to be that day, has *sens* (sense/meaning/direction) for me, for the people I work with, and for the eventual impact it will have in the world. I believe that we are facing a global crisis (whether we frame it as economic, social or environmental), and that it is essential that we learn to analyze the issues, shift relations of power to ones of understanding, and comprehend and own our role in the dynamics. I have come to the conclusion that being able to situate myself within an organizational structure dedicated to dialogue in the name of a broader vision of social and economic justice, gives me a deep sense of engagement. And, I count myself unbelievably lucky to have found this twice in two radically different forms or organizations: first within a university department, and now within a small private, soon to be cooperative, enterprise.

A few years ago I joined percolab, a social enterprise that accompanies “organisations to step into their emerging future with courage, care, and consciousness as we shift to a new

paradigm of working, learning, and being” (percolab website). Originally founded by Samantha Slade and Yves Otis, two creative, tech-savvy, people-centered souls who craved a space outside ‘the system’, it has become a space - now collectively governed by ten of us on two continents - to practice collaboration, play with possibilities, prototype ideas, and tap into collective intelligence – all without the restrictive order-based culture and bureaucratic policies endemic to large institutions and organizations. Our respective professional backgrounds provide the necessary credibility (and experience) to work on the inside of large institutions, while our collective capacity to innovate, collaborate, and learn with others provides a much-needed respite for many working ‘inside the system’.

At percolab people approach us because they want to do... something... They want their work to be... different... They want to evoke change in their organization but often they are not sure what that looks like, what to do, and they don’t really know how to get there, or indeed where ‘there’ is. So they come to percolab because they’ve either seen or heard that we do “something different”. Sometimes the something different appears pretty straightforward: they are organizing an event and would like it to be more participative. Sometimes the something different involves organizational transformation and deliverables. Sometimes the something different is linked to a deep feeling that something’s ‘gotta give’ or the organization may be in jeopardy.

And so we listen to their stories: of their project, of their organization, or maybe even of their lives. We ask questions: we listen. We suggest questions that perhaps need to be asked: we listen for how this resonates. Once our understanding of their particular situation and context ripens, we start dreaming and designing the “something different” that responds to the urge that sent them out seeking us in the first place. Invariably, any mandate we undertake involves dipping into our facilitator’s toolbox of participatory methods. In my experience this is where many people breathe a sigh of relief: “There are tools! There are methods! There is a recipe for us to do something different!” “Err... yes, yes and no!” we reply, “there are tools, there are methods, there are no recipes.” Perhaps we will offer a way to transform a staid conference that needs to be upped into a more participatory learning opportunity. Perhaps we will develop a learning circle to address an organizational unease that has been lying around for so long no one

knows how to tip-toe around it anymore. Perhaps we will lay the foundation for a large-scale citizen co-design project for a new public space. As every group and every situation is different we adapt our methods, our tools, and our know-how to best respond to what seems to need to happen.

Essentially, we exercise the ‘art of hosting’ (note the lowercase letters) with them, but as with the notion of ‘stealth hosting’ stated in Chapter Two, we will almost never call it that. ‘Hosting’ has simply become shorthand for us to describe the process whereby we sit down with people as human beings first (and clients or collaborators or participants second), engage with their reality, get very curious about their context, ask the most insightful questions we can think of, use methods to generate dialogue and new thinking, and capture (we often use the term ‘harvest’) the learning that emerges so that it may be funnelled into the most useful form for their specific purposes.

We present our work in myriad fashions: participatory strategy, collective intelligence, collaborative methodologies, agile governance, distributed authority, shared decision-making, co-design processes, courageous conversations, design thinking, learning thinking, user experience... The nomenclature is of little importance to us, what matters to us is the impact, the ripple effect, we want our work to have on the world. The tagline that is not found on the percolab website, but that we repeat to each other, and which informs much of our work is: “It’s all gonna crash if we don’t learn to collaborate.” As individuals, and as a team, we are deeply, painfully, aware of the complexity in the world, and the systemic structures of oppression that make life intolerable for so many, and that impacts every single one of us on the planet, albeit indirectly. We adhere to the ideas, presented in Chapter Two, that the traditional top-down decision-making structures we are all too familiar with, are not the ones that will get us out of this societal mess. We also adhere to the notion that we have to access our collective intelligence to start finding new ways of working together. Like with many other hosting practitioners we use dialogical methods to do this, and as several of us also have education and social justice backgrounds, we also explicitly tend to the internal conditions for this learning to happen, as per the third assumption I attribute to Freire (see above).

Our work, for the most part, is with ‘ordinary persons’ who, for all appearances, are of the privileged kind, that only experience the global crisis in an incredibly attenuated way. Yet, they are also part of the system where

the ordinary person is crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator, manoeuvred by myths which powerful social forces have created. These myths turn against him; they destroy and annihilate him. Tragically frightened, men fear authentic relationships and even doubt the possibility of their existence. On the other hand, fearing solitude, they gather in groups lacking in any critical and loving ties which might transform them into a cooperating unit, into a true community. [...]

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of modern man is his domination by the force of these myths and his manipulation by organized advertising, ideological or otherwise. Gradually, without realizing the loss, he relinquishes his capacity for choice; he is expelled from the orbit of decisions. Ordinary men do not perceive the tasks of the time; the latter are interpreted by an “elite” and presented in the form of recipes, of prescriptions. And when men try to save themselves by following the prescriptions, they drown in levelling anonymity, without hope and without faith, domesticated and adjusted. (Freire, 2014, p. 5).

So many people we meet are deeply unhappy, working in situations that makes them miserable, and inside rigid organizational structures that seem impossible to change. They have indeed, as Freire states above, been ‘domesticated’ by the system of which they are part. Yet, every so often, someone from one of these structures knocks on our door, looking for the aforementioned something ‘different’ as they develop, say, their next five-year plan.

For obvious reasons, we cannot be addressing the world crisis when what our client wants (and is paying us for) is a two-day organizational retreat to set up their strategic plan for the next five years. At the same time, if we truly want our work to have an impact on, and in, the world, we must work with our participants as individual humans, in the here and now, and do our best to create the conditions so that they may name their world. Through how we host our groups we create the space and opportunity for this naming, we gently bring in - one could say provoke them with - elements of the ‘outside’ world, we scaffold learning activities with dialogue sessions so that they may name the disconnect between what they experience and what they want. Systematically, I experience that the vast majority of people are good, kind human beings that want to do better and be better than their current reality. They long for connection, for a *sens*

(sense/meaning/direction) to their world. That they can have a positive affect and effect on the people around them, on their community. Some think about the broader world, the complexity we are living in, and systems of oppression; some do not. And, yes this *is* relevant to developing a five-year plan for an organization, as these are the undercurrents that are present in so many of the groups we work with - whether we choose to consider them or not.

What I am trying to elicit in the groups I work with is the ‘moment’ I refer to earlier; how someone goes from feeling powerless or “domesticated”, as Freire says, to that first inkling they get that maybe, just maybe they can create change in the world around them.

“To surmount the situation of oppression,” says Freire (2000),  
people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. But the struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation (p. 47).

If an individual feels impotent in the face of office politics; if they can’t contribute to sorting out the dynamics of their own organization; if they are not meaningfully engaged with other people and the communities to which they belong: how are they going to fare in view of resolving ‘real world’ problems? Miserably, would be my bet.

We use the five-year plan as an excuse to (quietly and gently) exercise our radical pedagogy muscles, as we slowly attempt a deeper transformation. The use of participatory methodologies and dialogical processes allow us to effectively and efficiently meet the ‘deliverable’ of developing a five-year plan, and also serve as a stratagem to get people to collaborate together, to recognize the humanity in one another, to harness their collective intelligence for the common good, and to start imagining that there are indeed other ways an organization can function away from the traditional hierarchic structure where knowledge, resources, power and decision-making are tightly hoarded by a very small elite. We use our work - which is incidentally also how we earn a living - to name their world so that they may start making sense of it, so that they may identify their own ‘limit-situations’ and ‘untested feasibilities’. I simply do not have the words to describe the feeling that goes over a room when someone ‘clicks’, when they encounter that ‘moment’ and start going “Oh, *I* can do that.”

The sense that drives my work is that through quietly subversive acts of rehumanization, by stubbornly believing in people and their capacity for change, we will have an impact outside of that one meeting, that retreat, that series of workshops... and plant the seeds for a different way of working and being together, so that we may shift global crisis.

Through my roots in the community sector; through my association with the Art of Hosting; through my learning from Freire; through the countless hours I have spent participating in or leading public conversations, workshops, trainings, and other types of participatory processes; through my work at the Institute; through my work at percolab: I have come to firmly believe that I am, indeed, part of a larger movement, as evoked by Hawken (2004), of “ordinary and some not-so-ordinary individuals willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in an attempt to restore some semblance of grace, justice, and beauty to this world” (Hawken, 2007, p. 4).

Murphy (1999), calls this an ‘open conspiracy’, and offers us:

a proposal for how individual people, and people in groups, can form a conspiracy – an open and public conspiracy – to begin to change the present and influence the future in a positive progressive direction; in fact, to influence the evolution of human society and human being themselves. When I use the word ‘conspiracy’ in this way, the first reaction is often confused, since people are used to conspiracy being a negative idea – implying secret, subversive, even treasonous behavior. I am proposing that we reappropriate this word, and the very act of conspiring together, and transform it into a positive and transcendent form of social and political action. Secret? No This is a conspiracy that is open, and defiant, and celebratory. Subversive? Yes. This would be a conspiracy that is publicly and explicitly subversive of everything in society – systems, institutions, and structures – that erodes humanity and individual dignity, and exploits people as though they were machines. *Treasonous*? Never. The conspiracy described in this book is the antithesis of treason – a conspiracy based on our full and open practice of responsible citizenship to hold accountable those who would use their privilege to betray the human values of equality, justice and social solidarity in the interests of greed and power.

### **The overwhelming benefits of marinated learning**

I have spent the last three years of my life feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of ideas. For over one thousand days now, I have been contemplating, researching and writing about Paulo Freire’s thinking and the Art of Hosting’s approach, and the link I intuit between the two. Of course, there have been long periods when the need to care for our young family or

develop my career took precedence over this thesis project, and justifiably so. Yet, in these thousand days I have never stopped being intrigued by my topic or engaging with it.

It is an interesting (and, at times, frustrating) endeavour to be working through a three year-old idea, an idea that rooted before my daughter could walk and talk (she now takes ballet and starts many sentences with “Actually...”). The space between the time I first thought of my interview questions and the recent moment when I sat down to connect the dots in the responses has been rife with learning – the kind of learning that results in personal paradigm shifts.

I have gone from feeling like an observer detachedly studying a new (to me) approach to facilitation work to figuring out that the Art of Hosting is not a ‘tool’ I can just plunk down in my facilitator’s toolbox - it is both simpler and more complicated than that. Instead, I have found finding myself internalizing learning and ways of being from my contact with the Art of Hosting community. The ways in which I have connected with the reflection and experiences of many thoughtful AoH practitioners has influenced and affected (I would like to imagine positively) how I facilitate groups and design learning experiences, but it has not given me *the* answer - it has made me ask more questions. The Art of Hosting community (in its different forms: personal connections, websites, and social media) has become my ‘go-to’ resource when I need help, information or inspiration to help me in my everyday work. Further, the more I read, think and reflect on the Art of Hosting, the more my own understanding about my profession of facilitating groups deepens, and the more I bring my ‘hosting practice’ into my personal life.

I have realized over the last three years that this qualitative research project is far from objective, rather, it is in service of my own curiosity and need to learn. In the most literal sense of the word I am very much interested in the qualities – the attributes and characteristics – that can possibly be revealed about the Art of Hosting and Paulo Freire’s work. In essence, I am not motivated to think and write about Freirean pedagogy and the Art of Hosting as objective concepts that are ‘out there’ but rather as very subjective ideas that are ‘in here’ – thoughts inside of me that are ready to unfurl. I have hungrily pursued this research because I intuit that my own practice as a facilitator, and as a human being, is stronger, deeper, more grounded, rigorous and impactful when I connect Freirean thinking to hosting practice.

In investigating my hunch that the Art of Hosting's approach is philosophically in line with Freirean thinking about dialogue, I have been attempting to name the disjuncture between the world I want to live in and the reality I see unfolding before me. Freire's main idea is big: overcome oppression through critical consciousness. The Art of Hosting's main idea is big: address complex challenges through dialogue. Reams of paper, and gigs of digital space have been used to probe these big ideas. Yet, in my opinion, these ideas are both small and simple. So small and so simple, I have often joked that I could write the point of my thesis on a Post-It: "The whole point of both Freire and of the Art of Hosting is to become more fully human."

This is my work: to become more fully human. This is my practice: to create the conditions so that others may be more fully human with each other. I can fit the idea on a Post-It note, but I am learning and re-learning how to apply it every day.

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