

At the Bottom of the U: Arts-Based Leadership of Creative Learning Processes in Educators and Social Workers' Training

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Abstract. The purpose of the developmental project "Dance with the future" is to test a new professional area for educators and social workers, and at the same time to offer teachers within this educational sector a novel opportunity for personal and professional growth. This project is targeted for teachers in education and caregiving at Danish University College North (UCN) and is being evaluated by means of a qualitative case study, which is described in the present paper. The scientific documentation will collect evidence for the application of arts-based facilitation tools in change processes, and on opportunities to foster creativity and innovation at UCN. The social technologies applied draw from Expressive Arts therapy and systems thinking, respectively through means of arts-based coaching and Theory U.

Keywords: innovation, arts-based learning processes, social technologies, coaching, organizational learning, and systems thinking.

1 Dancing at the Bottom of the U

In the present paper I wish to describe an ongoing development-and-research project within the field of organizational learning and the arts. The purpose of the development project "Dance with the future" is to test a new professional area for educators and to offer teachers within the educational sector a novel opportunity for personal and professional growth. During the Spring 2011, the project "Dance with the future" offered a group of teachers at Danish University College North (UCN) the opportunity to know more about arts-based coaching and Theory U. The former framework is based on the application of Expressive Arts therapy's tools to coaching tasks; the latter is the theory and social technology conceived by MIT scholar Otto Scharmer (arts-based coaching and Theory U will be shortened in ABC-U). Both frameworks draw from the practical application of artistic –or arts-based- tools and understandings to facilitation and coaching.

UCN is an undergraduate school for several professions, among the others is the one for "pedagogists" (in Danish: *pædagoger*). Students can aim at becoming

educators and social workers, e.g. as pre-school (nursery nurses) or kindergarten educators, social workers or caregivers at public institutions, experts in children and adults with special needs. UCN felt the need for developing new areas of professional application for its students; therefore a group of school leaders got engaged in a deep reflection about the issue of profession-development. The first step the coordination group took was to engage the school's internal resources, which could carry on such an innovative enterprise. Specific assets were found in the innovation group that was already working with practical applications of Theory U in social or organizational contexts and whose teachers were engaged as out-reaching facilitators. In other words, external customers hired the innovation group in order to facilitate change management processes, activity that the UCN innovation group offered besides the group's internal teaching tasks. Since the school leadership wished to try out an innovative approach to the management of learning processes, professional development and organizational learning, this initiative was considered suitable to test new future strategies, and the innovation group's activities were structured and widened in a pivotal project.

The project "Dance with the future" was initiated with the help of an external expert in the field of Expressive Arts and arts-based coaching, and designed as a joint collaboration between the UCN's internal innovator, expert in Theory U, and the external consultant, expert in arts-based coaching. The two experts had the tasks of designing, coordinating and supervising the project, and of teaching the facilitation tools. Both the coordination group and its leadership, expressed the strong wish to link a specific evaluation to this experiment, as they were convinced that follow-up research would strengthen the project's outputs, both at organizational and educational level.

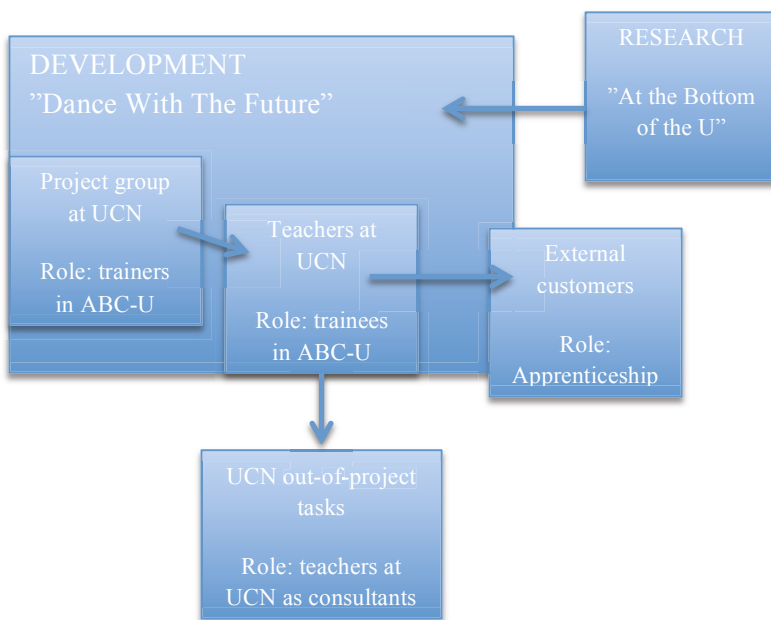


Fig. 1. Relational network of involved stakeholders

The research study “At the Bottom of the U” was kicked-off within this wish. It aims at following and describing the process within “Dance with the future” and at reporting the outputs of this experimental initiative. The research project “At the Bottom of the U” is both the result of strategic thinking underlying the development project and a future tool for internal evaluation. At strategic level, the research project links UCN to a prestigious Danish academic institute: Aalborg University and its Institute for Learning and Philosophy, which I represent. In the present paper I will focus on the description of this research project.

The above figure visualizes the structure of the developmental project and its relationship to the research project. The target group of both development activities and research observation consists of teachers for education and social workers’ students at UCN. These teachers take a learner perspective within the frames of “Dance with the future”, and act as students within the course and as trainees in their final apprenticeship. At the moment, the study is in its data-collection stage, where ethnographic observations and interviews are being carried on, as described in the section regarding the methodological approach. For this reason, the present paper will describe background, research design and expected findings rather than results, which I expect to publish during the Spring 2012.

2 The Creative Challenge

The background for this study is the need that educators and social workers’ schools are in the middle of: on one side the whole professional field meets the modern society’s needs –or cravings- for creativity, on the other side educators and social workers have a hard time with the systematic integration of creativity in their professional routines or in their own learning and development. Creativity and new-thinking are the key-competences for the future, but how can educators and social workers apply creative or innovative solutions to their everyday? How can educators and social workers’ schools teach the skills for the future to their students? And how can these schools imagine, creatively, new professional applications for their student’s skills and competences?

The need of being competitive in the new global economy puts education in a key position in the cultural and political debate. New standards of excellence are needed, but it is not enough to raise the past standards or push students harder or even keep on measuring them with sophisticated instruments. What may be more important is to think differently, about education, about learning, and even about excellence. The push toward competition is what led UCN to investigate how to innovate within its field.

Especially if their job involves working with youngsters and children, educators and social workers have a central role in imagining new ways of developing minds and sensitivities, bodies and awareness. Therefore they need to be trained in the skills of creative thinking and making, which they can transfer into other fields or domains.

Being trained in the art of creativity and new-thinking, educators and social workers are expected to naturally be able to transfer their creative skills into pedagogical tasks or even other contexts. In reality, being creative is very different from being trained to teach or inspire creativity in children; being trained in teaching creativity to children or inspiring children to creativity is very different from leading larger creative processes. The same can be formulated for the social workers’

occupation: learning about creativity and innovation doesn't grant the ability to think and act creatively. To fill in the gap, educators and social workers can be guided with specific tools, reflections and meta-reflections. Within the project "Dance with the future" the tools chosen are Expressive Arts (specifically arts-based coaching) and Theory U. I'll describe below how the two are being intertwined and applied. The presumption is that training educators and social workers to apply and reflect upon creative and innovative social technologies would broaden their disposition to new-thinking and build brand-new competences, spendable in innovation tasks.

3 Research Design

Before discussing the theoretical background of the present research, I wish to frame the methodological setting by indicating my considerations about hypothesis, research questions, empirical data-collection, and ethical guidelines.

With a theoretical and empirical background on my specific research interests [1], [2], I designed a research plan focused on the following hypothesis:

- The arts and arts-based processes can inspire, create and implement an optimal innovative and creative approach within the pedagogical field
- Arts and arts-based tools can have a qualitative influence in learning, development and prosperity for the field of preschoolers or kindergarten education and social workers' caregiving
- Arts and arts-based approach can be integrated with optimal outputs in educators and social workers' education and training strategies

In other words, the project "At the bottom of the U" examines whether and how creativity and aesthetic learning processes can foster and implement change within the educators and social workers' institutions at individual, professional (domain) and organizational (field) level. Drawing from Csikszentmihalyi [4] I will portray three levels of organisational learning: individual, field and domain.

I will look at the specific quality of individual learning and development, trying to answer the following research questions:

- Which specific cognitive challenges does the arts-based learning offer to the educators and social workers' field?
- Which specific positive emotions arise in the arts-based learning?

At the level of field interaction, I will describe how organisational gatekeepers facilitate or oppose the new professional opportunities or the arts-based approaches, and how this innovative initiative can open future career opportunities:

- Which consequences for the field of educators and social workers can be observed?
- Can the arts-based processes contribute to create an innovative professional opportunity for the UCN's educators and social workers?

Finally I will involve my informants in reflecting on which qualitative changes can contribute to re-think the whole education for social workers and which concrete propositions can be prototyped for the educators and social workers' careers of the future.

- Which consequences for the domain of educators and social workers can be observed?
- Can the arts-based processes contribute to create a culture of deep thinking and engaging education at the UCN?

Since this is an empirical and case-based qualitative study, the research method selected is ethnographic and participatory [9], [19].

The target group of the qualitative fieldwork is the trainee group (see figure 1.): they are followed by means of ethnographic participant observation and are involved in ethnographic interviews (individual and group). The observation prioritizes the apprenticeship sessions, where the trainees, divided in pairs, are asked to apply the principles of arts-based coaching and Theory U. The pairs freely choose the hosting institution, complete observations and interviews in the field, design and lead arts-based interventions.

As a support to the semi-structured interviews the trainees are invited to focus group interviews (one completed and one still to be held), with the intention of establishing a participatory relationship with the ongoing scholarly research.

Finally the trainees will be asked to respond to a qualitative self-report, in order to provide a reliable triangulation and bias reduction.

One last remark about the research design should be given to the ethical principles that are guiding the study. Special attention to this should be always given when research is with and about people, awareness that led me to contact the participants beforehand. Specifically, the participating institutions and participating trainees were offered the opportunity to accept or decline their contribution to the research project, and were informed about the project's purpose, overall design, time-span, and researcher's expectations to their role and contribution to the project.

4 Theory “ABC-U”

As introduced above, the main theoretical traditions, which are at the background of both the developmental initiative and the research project are the Expressive Arts [11], [12], [13] and Theory U [15], [16], [20]. They are two distinct theoretical frameworks within different domains: the former is therapeutic and phenomenological, the latter organizational and systemic. Nevertheless, they share a common interest for the aesthetic, bodily and ineffable knowledge of the senses, as mediated by arts forms and processes. Especially the Expressive Arts application in coaching, the arts-based coaching, and its “decentering” stage show great similarities with the Theory U stage of “sensitizing”. These terms, which will be explained and conceptualised below, constitute the theoretical core of the developmental initiative “Dance with the future”.

Theory U is a model, which visualizes individual (individual-in-organizations), collective and organizational learning processes and is targeted to a systemic vision of the future. The essence of the theory is the deep level of learning skills, “presencing” that can be achieved by activating all the known, unknown, forgotten or hidden human resources. This theory was at first developed by a group of academics affiliated to MIT -Otto Scharmer, in collaboration with Joseph Jaworski, Peter Senge and Adam Kahane [20]- and afterwards fully conceptualized by Scharmer [16].

The theoretical background is undoubtedly Senge's systems thinking and approach to organizational learning. To this, the almost 10-year's testing of the theory in

organizational practices adds experimental evidence, such as the experience at the Society for Organizational Learning and the many interviews with world leaders and experts in organizational learning within the project "Dialogue on Leadership", which contributed to a clear grounding of theory in real challenges [5].

The U-model can be used both as a theory, e.g. as a description of a new ontological and epistemological perspective on organisations, or as a social technology, e.g. as a tool to generate deeper conversations among individuals in organizations. A special feature is a proactive and cooperative approach that differs from other learning models by its non-linear u-shaped movement from knowledge to action, which is strongly related to systems thinking principles.

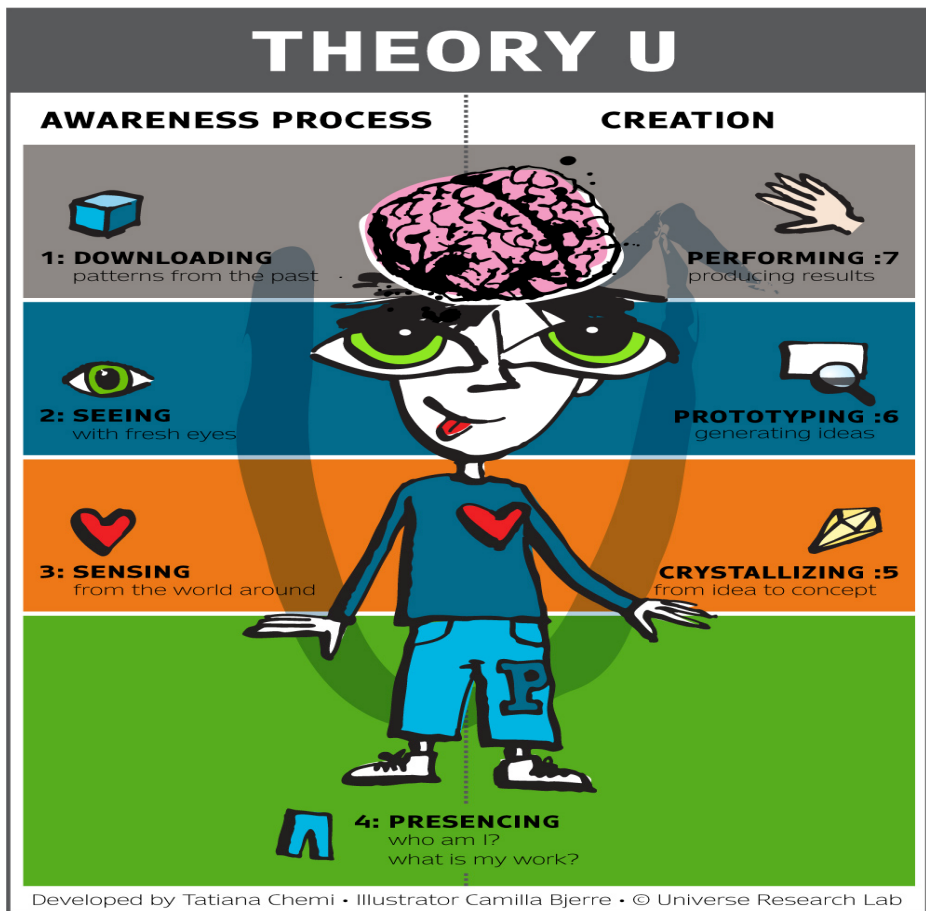


Fig. 2. The U-journey¹

¹ The illustration appears originally in Danish at www.blivklog.dk/page13070.aspx. Scharmer's model can be downloaded at www.ottoscharmer.com.

The above model makes visible the learning journey that we go through or can shape differently when we need to learn optimally. In Scharmer's analysis [16], when we need to learn in organizations, we often activate the usual cognitive processes, based on past learning. We download the usual information, within the usual frames and habits, and then we apply this "old" knowledge by acting uncritically. This non-innovative process results in certain patterns of action that lead us towards a performance that is quick, tangible and manageable, but also "more of the same."

Being an expert, in this perspective, is not always an advantage, since experts specialize in one circumscribed area and exclude new and unusual opportunities or solutions. In a world characterized by rapid change and complexity, creative solutions are a necessity, as well as the need to adapt to a challenging reality. Experts often download what they have learned, experienced or witnessed in the past and often forget to be present in the moment, being so ready to what emerges. Scharmer proposes instead to go beyond downloading and the usual way of thinking and behaving, by engaging in a deeper learning journey. This can be achieved by activating three consecutive levels of thinking: 1) to see, 2) to sense and 3) to pre-sense.

- 1) "Seeing" is the level where individuals and groups let go of the old habits, take a break and try to see what we see and to hear what we hear, mindfully [10]. This stage is still associated with a traditional cognitive process but its purpose is to slowly work toward an open mind.
- 2) "Sensing" is the level where individuals and groups activate alternative learning channels by stimulating aesthetic sensitivity; artistic experiences; spirituality; contact with nature. Sensing helps us to open up to our emotional intelligence [8] and to change our perceptive abilities. This is a necessary step toward wholeness and presence.
- 3) "Presencing" is a word that plays with two meanings. If pronounced as "pre'sencing" it will highlight the presence and attendance to learning; if pronounced "prese'nsing" it will put emphasis on the senses. In both cases, the stress is on the experience of transformation of the self and will. Presencing is always both an individual and a collective process, because individuals learn while being in contact with the personal self and with others. At the bottom of the U-model individuals and groups experience a deep content-related conversation and a deep relational contact with each other. Themes the bottom of the U hosts are related to the source of one's own motivation, which stems from a reflection on oneself ("Who are you?") and about one's role in the world ("what is my job?").

This process of openness can be seen on the left side of the model, while the right side visualizes the various stages of a knowledge-performance process. The process of designing and performing innovative solutions, often based on new ways of thinking or new knowledge, can profit from this openness.

A performance demands, according to Theory U an inverse and corresponding process similar to the left side of the model. This is divided into: 1) crystallization, 2) prototyping, 3) performance or action.

- 1) When individuals or groups experience a "presencing" state, they often deal with an intrinsic motivation and clarity in the form of a paradox: It is impossible not to act. It is impossible not to "crystallize" one's thoughts on possible actions.
- 2) Scharmer suggests a rapid prototype of the crystallized actions.

3) Similarly, he suggests acting immediately, before the inner censorship and rationalization castrates every innovative solution or suggestion. It is important to preserve the good and innovative energy that can be the main output of the U-learning journey.

For what is concerning the learning journey through the arts-based coaching setting, the coordination group of “Dance with the future” has chosen the theory and praxis of the Expressive Arts Therapy as practiced and conceptualized by Swiss Paolo Knill.

To illustrate how the theory of Expressive Arts can be applied to coaching I can draw on my own interpretation [1] and on Knill’s [13].


Ordinary experience of life		Life of client	
Establishing trust	”Hallo”	Filling in	
Art experience	SERV SENSITISE EXPLORE REPETITION VALIDATING	Decentering	
Alternative context of the world	Reflection through poetic concepts, sentences and mindset	Analysis	
Extraordinary experience of the world		Harvest	

Fig. 3. Arts-based coaching session model

In a coaching situation, the client steps in coming from his/her everyday life, and the related experience of it. He or she (or them, in case of a group or a team) is seeking help: his/her ordinary experience of life has entered a negative spiral. These help-seekers feel restricted by a lack of opportunities, alternatives or solutions and experience a limited play range. They experience a feeling of impotency (“I am not able to do anything”), a lack of resources (“if I only had a job, I wouldn’t be depressed”), a blind spot or lack of perspective (“I know better than anyone else about my issue”), loneliness (“no one can help me”), separation of body and mind. This negativity is consistent to what Scharmer defines “the blind spot”, and as in Theory U, the Expressive Arts turn to bodily, aesthetic and sensitive experiences in order to switch the focus from helplessness and blindness to mindful presence and relational well-being. As individuals, and as groups, we are experts in our problem; we know everything about it. Yet, in practice - we are experts in setting our own restrictions! When coachees enter an arts-based coaching session, they undergo a concrete process described by the phases visualised in the above figure: 1. filling in, 2. decentering, 3. analysis (or analysing),

4. harvest (or harvesting)². At the end of the session, they might be able to perceive the world differently as plenty of endless and achievable possibilities. The Expressive Arts, similarly to Theory U, achieve this by stimulating our natural feelings towards aesthetic processes and products and by practically engaging coachees in the artistic process of creation. Art consultants or coaches should offer their clients activities, which demand low manual and technical skills, and yet should be meaningful and not trivial. The artistic task must be challenging but not threatening, as in an optimal learning experience, otherwise defined as flow [3]. To stimulate flow experiences within coaching sessions might seem a contradiction in terms, being the coaching activities based on mindfulness and awareness, versus flow experiences enhanced by a sense of deep presence in the task and self-forgetfulness. This apparent contradiction is not conceptualised in the arts-based coaching, for the simple reason that the two different experiences occur in two different stages: flow and self-forgetfulness during the decentering activities, and the coaching reflective activity during the harvesting.

As in the Theory U framework, the experience of the senses opens up to a deeper (and often surprising) reflection and conversation. Having completed the creative phase of art making, coachees step into the analytical phase. This is the most difficult stage of a coaching session where an artistic decentering is used. *Decentering* is a specific term used in the Expressive Arts to define the process of forgetting one's own issue or problem and being completely involved and immersed in the alternative experience of art-making. It is the experience of being out of the lack-of-resources-centre, and moving outside of it, building resilience. This experience is induced by the *SERV*. **SENSITISE**: is the stimulation of the different senses through specific activities. In Theory U terms it corresponds to the "sensing" stage. **EXPLORE**: is the openness to investigate material reality in a new light. **REPETITION**: is the repetition of the task given, beyond feelings of boredom and against any inducement to superficiality. In this stage the participants have to face their motivations and self-discipline, being challenged into staying in the task in spite of boredom, in spite of routines and in order to avoid shallowness. **VALIDATING**: is the corroboration of the work done. This can be done through an evaluation session or a metaphorical activity that makes reflection visible.

When the *SERV* stage is done, the reflection can begin. The analytical stage is determined by the evaluation of the artistic product (or in Knill's terms: "oeuvre") and has a clear phenomenological approach. "To stay or remain at the surface" doesn't mean to be superficial, but rather not to lose touch with the material truths of the empirical world, as in the etymological sense of the word "sur-face". Observations are guided through reflections on: The "surface" of the work; The "process" of shaping; The "experience" of doing it; "What does the work say? How is it significant?" [13]. After that, a coach has to make sure to harvest as much meaning as possible from the experience of art making, building bridges of meaning and associations between the artistic experience and real-life challenges. This stage hosts unexpected views and clarifications.

5 Future Perspectives and Visions

How the above frameworks are going to be conceptualised within the educators and social workers' understandings and subsequently applied in facilitation tasks is still to

² All the definitions are borrowed from the Expressive Arts theory.

be documented. By now, it is possible to look at how the expert-trainers make sense of the two theories as one paradigm. In the very dissemination of theoretical concepts the two experts unite arts-based coaching (abc) with Theory U (u) in a new, common synthesis: the abc-u model. This conceptual patchwork is justified by the similarities mentioned above, which make the two theories mirror and complete each other. Within the vocabulary of the project's participants the therapeutic and phenomenological terms and concepts blend consistently with the organisational and systemic ones, the former being used within arts-based coaching, the latter within dialogical social technologies, as Theory U. Specifically, the expert-trainers seem to draw parallels between the left side of the U and the decentering experience. Both learning journeys are described as dialogic, collective (even in case of individual coaching, the intervention is always relational, involving coach, coachee and artwork) and aesthetic. Both imply radical changes and deep learning by means of the meeting with the arts and artistic experiences.

But why should we turn to the arts in order to solve individual or organisational problems at all? The Expressive Arts maintain that art has the power to stimulate imagination and creativity, being among countless means of inspiration for creativity, innovation and personal development. Then why are the arts a privileged tool both within arts-based coaching and Theory U? This discussion falls beyond the purpose of the present article. Nevertheless I will hint at some considerations. The arts have a specific form of logic, which is different from all the others, being bodily, mediated and meaning generating. Introducing this language in learning processes means breaking with the conventional thinking and mindset, and being open to new ways of making sense with the alternative logic of aesthetics. In so doing, individuals unlock the unsaid, the emotional, the opaque [6], and the multi-dimensional in their psychological and social being [14]. Moreover the final artistic product is a material, tangible witness to the creative process. By means of the artistic product we can refer at anytime to the artistic process that led to it, even when the process is finished or completed. The artistic work is a "materialization of imagination" always present and "thingly" [13]. Even though the arts appear in the above theoretical frameworks as just one of the means of stimulating perception, emotion and cognition, it is my opinion that it is no coincidence that both frameworks make use of artistic experiences. The ambition of my research study is to uncover the reasons for this specific preference, conceptualising my reflection within artistic learning processes.

The long-term ambition in the pedagogical field, to build resilience together with skills and dispositions seems to be enacted by the "Dance with the future" project. Here, teachers are students themselves and learn how to challenge their own creative competences, through innovative thinking and profession development. They learn to appreciate, nourish and encourage artistic and aesthetic learning processes in order to cultivate wholeness of learning environments. These processes, being conceptualized within the frameworks of organizational learning and coaching, can be actually applied to lead positive or optimal change. Outputs from this initiative are therefore expected to be promising within several fields and domains, both the pedagogical and the organisational.

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