To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Cheri B. Torres entitled “Levelising: A Collaborative Learning Practice for Strength-Based Organizations.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology and Research.

John M. Peters, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

John Haas
Trena Paulus
Mary Ziegler

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
LEVELISING: A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PRACTICE FOR STRENGTH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

A Dissertation
Presented for the
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Cheri B. Torres
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family:
Michael, Carmen, Laura and my mother
for their patience and love during the journey
and in memory of my father.
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Abstract

This study examined the experience of Appreciative Inquiry practitioners participating in collaborative learning. Participants engaged in a process of action and reflection called levelising, designed to surface assumptions and hidden frames of reference (Peters, 1999). Although the focus of their eight-month dialogue was on understanding post-modern organizational design and strength-based organization practices, the researcher was interested in the impact of levelising on the participants' practices, including the researcher's own.

Data sources consisted of phenomenological interviews with eight participants, email posts, and field notes. Analysis data revealed six themes, four of which addressed group dynamics and forums for engagement. Two addressed the experience of participants' levelising conversations. Findings indicated that the elements of collaborative learning—dialogical space, multiple ways of knowing, cycles of action and reflection, and a focus on knowledge construction—played a role in meaning making.

The results suggest that levelising may offer a practical means for double-loop learning, helping those who engage in this practice align theories in action with espoused theories. This research has implications for educators, consultants, and business leaders interested in implementing a progressive and ordered practice to become strength-based organizations.
As an organization consultant and trainer I am continuously looking for ways to be of service and value to clients. These days that means understanding how to support organizational capacity to succeed in a continuously changing and ever-more global economy. The rapid rate of technological and environmental change, the Internet and the emerging international market have changed the landscape for doing business (Anderson et al., 2008; Raelin, 2002; Schein, 1993). A variety of action research-based approaches have surfaced in response to what seems to be the call for continuous learning (Cooperrider & Shrivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Digenti, 1999; Hattori & Lapidus, 2003; Schein, 1993; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 2004). Action research, however, has tended towards problem solving, limiting most organizations to incremental changes when what seems to be needed is innovation and a continuous evolutionary approach to organizing. Appreciative Inquiry (AI), as a form of action research, promises to address the organizational schemata that limit creativity (Ludema et al., 2006), yet the majority of AI change initiatives fail to generate the changes necessary to create systemic change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). When this approach is implemented in organization development, a five step process is often used called the 5D cycle: (1) Defining the topic or issue that is to be studied, (2) discovering stories of excellence, (3) dreaming the ideal, (4) designing the systems that will deliver the dream, and (5) living into the destiny. My own experience, as well as that of many of my colleagues, is that the AI approach falters at the design and destiny phases in the AI 5D cycle.

This dissertation represents the action research associated with an eight-month exploration by nine AI practitioners seeking to deepen and broaden our perspectives around
design and destiny in an effort to understand the relationship between Appreciative Inquiry and organizational design and our own individual roles in facilitating change.

As the goal of my research was to improve my practice, I used the DATA-DATA model for action research (Peters, 2006). This model offered a clear step-by-step means for making sure that my research focused on something that was likely to deliver results. The DATA-DATA model supported my ability to step back and analyze what might be at issue in my practice and then formulate a research design that would address that issue.

In the first phase of the DATA-DATA model, I examined my own practice and developed a practical theory for how I might change my actions to bring about an outcome that was more aligned with my goals. This effort began with an objective description of my practice and the issue or problem that I was interested in addressing in my practice. This was followed by an analysis of my practice; an exploration into what I thought might be the nature of the issue. Based upon my analysis, I formed a practical theory for how I could address the issue. Based upon this practical theory, I developed a plan to put my practical theory into action.

The second phase of the DATA-DATA is the research aspect of the application. This phase includes my research questions, the research design and data collection and analysis procedures, my findings, and a discussion of the results. It also includes revisiting my practical theory in light of my findings and finally concludes with a new action plan for my practice.

My dissertation is divided into seven Chapters. The first chapter offers a description of my practice and my initial stimulus for engaging in this research. Chapter Two provides an analysis of my practice and the issues that I believed needed to be addressed. Chapter Three offers a practical theory for how I might go about changing my actions in order to improve my
practice. Chapter Four describes the actions I believed would improve my practice if my theory were accurate. Chapter Five describes my research design and procedures; Chapter Six presents my findings. In Chapter Seven I discuss my findings in light of my practical theory, share my future actions, and close with implications for the field.
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Chapter One

My Practice

The Stimulus for My Research

In my work with individuals and organizations, including my own, I was challenged by the persistence of old behaviors despite the decision and intention to live and work by new and different principles and values. Whether it was my own behavior, the interactions within my own organization, or my efforts to support team and organizational change, there was more to change than simply an intention to do so. Specifically, my efforts to follow the Appreciative Inquiry model for facilitating transformational change had met with varying degrees of success. Facilitating awareness around the nature of inquiry and dialogue had been highly successful; people intellectually understood the concept of social constructionism and the relevance of positive psychology. Designing a way to live into that new awareness was more difficult. As a consultant and facilitator, I wanted to better understand what kinds of actions on my part were more likely to support sustainable transformational change for organizations interested in becoming strength-based and to live into those actions with my colleagues and clients.

A Description of My Practice

I am a consultant in a small business that engages in two primary businesses: (1) manufacture and sale of experiential learning products that can be used to engage people in activities that help them recognize and appreciate their capacity for shared leadership, teamwork and collaboration, and (2) training, consulting, and coaching in the areas of leadership,
teamwork, collaboration, organizational learning, and whole systems change. The company started in 1996 with the primary focus of putting the tools and training for experiential learning in the hands of those who could integrate it into their training and education programs. In my consulting work I focused on supporting what I referred to as transformational change and on building what the Appreciative Inquiry community refers to as an appreciative or strength-based organization (SBO)—changing the way people see themselves in relationship to others and the world, supporting full engagement and learning, and focusing on individual and collective strengths and capacity for organizational excellence and sustainability that is assessed through metrics.

We have traditionally combined two primary approaches in our work with others: Experiential Learning (EL) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI). EL uses activities that require participants to use their inherent skills and ways of working together to complete specific challenges. Each challenge is designed to offer metaphors for work situations so that during debriefing sessions following an activity the group can reflect on their actions, gain perspective, insight, and see new and different frames for approaching work or life situations, for the purpose of applying those new perspectives in the workplace.

AI is an asset-based approach to living and working grounded in social constructionism and the notion that we co-create our future through inquiry (we move in the direction of the questions we ask). The 5D cycle, a method used by most AI practitioners, is intended to be an iterative process with the ultimate goal of making this a continuous way of being in the organization.
These combined approaches allow an individual and a team to experience new ways of being and working together. AI has enhanced the EL reflection cycle by supporting the intellectual transfer and application of the learning that surfaces during reflection. I use the word intellectual because we continue to run into a challenge I have faced for more than 20 years: living into desired changes based on new ways of perceiving. Awareness and intention do not guarantee action. Something more is at work than simple cause and effect since we can recognize something as a possibility, desire to do it, and yet not move towards it, or begin to move towards it only to return to old habits of relating with the slightest provocation.

The MTC approach to teambuilding, collaboration, leadership and learning requires a group to manage a complex change process that really has no beginning and no end. We present our clients with a different frame for understanding what it means to be in relationship and how to go about organizing. Grounded in social constructionism, we suggest a continuously evolving way of being and organizing that is generated by the participants themselves moment by moment. We have collaborated with other AI practitioners in our efforts to improve our facilitation of the two latter steps in the 5D cycle and modeled their use of practices that support organizational gathering and open dialogue, such as Open Space (Owen, 2007) and World Café (Brown et al., 2007). As mentioned earlier, this typically generates action planning, with the consequence that people often feel that AI simply generates more work.

Whether we are working with teams of 12 or large organizations that are interested in various practices associated with SBOs—teamwork, shared leadership, excellence and learning—we struggle with the design and destiny process when using the AI 5D change cycle. Our clients have told us that our work with them generates clear understanding that they are co-
creating the dynamics of their relationships and that developing collaborative relational
dynamics is not only possible but also desirable. Through experiential activities small groups
develop new ways of engaging with one another, they acknowledge how beneficial these new
ways of interacting will be in the workplace and they develop plans for how things will be
different as a result of these changes including the creation of formal principles by which they
want to work together. They even begin to practice these new ways of being and doing, but
somewhere along the line, they bump up against something, such as conflict, and they fall back
into old habits and ways of being, despite having committed to act differently and despite
knowing that these dynamics will not generate the outcomes they are after.

Larger groups come together to look at whole systems change and we engage them in a
whole systems 5D cycle. The first three stages of the 5D cycle, define, discover, and dream,
determine the focus of the inquiry and tap the potential of an organization unleashing the energy
available when people discover what they value and what is possible when they are collectively
at their best. People are inspired by the true stories and experiences of what has been possible
throughout their organization; they are encouraged by what they have been able to create
together at times of peak performance. Armed with these rich stories, they imagine excellence in
their organization at every moment; if they can do it sometimes, why not all times? This energy,
insight and motivation, however, dissipates as the group looks to design the system that will
deliver that dream and practice a new way of working together.

Designing the organization and its systems to deliver such excellence seems to be the
natural next step, or is it? The 5D cycle suggests that it is, but my experience indicates this is not
a natural or easy step. This is where complexity enters. This is where people immediately want to
jump to action plans and definitive answers to what will deliver the dream. They see the problem to be fixed and immediately jump to inventing solutions.

In their meta-analysis of organizations that used AI to generate transformational change, Bushe and Kassam (2005) found that the majority did not undergo a transformation in the way they do business. In essence, they engaged in the discovery and dream processes without building the capacity to change their design and hence destiny. MTC’s experience falls into the larger percentage. This research was inspired by my desire to better understand how to engage with clients so that through our shared actions they develop the capacity to work differently: they begin to recognize and make appropriate structural changes in how they organize (design) and then become fully empowered to continue their own on-going transformational evolution (destiny) into becoming a successful Strength-Based Organization.
Chapter Two

Analysis of My Experience

In order to develop a practical theory for what I might do to increase my understanding and effectiveness, I analyzed my thinking and actions in an effort to discover what might be influencing my thinking. At the outset, I saw a similarity between what was going on in my client organizations and my own experience. Just like my clients that were locked into their organizational structures, it occurred to me that I might well be locked into my own cognitive framework, which limited my ability to support change, and that it may even have been reinforcing the very organizational structures I was trying to help change. To begin with, the language I used continued to reflect the more traditional, industrial, positivist mental model for organizational change: identify the problem—the organizational structure; fix it—create a new structure. My initial stimulus—how can I do design so they get it—suggested a right way to organize, one that could be proven effective and implemented anywhere, by anyone.

My work with EL and AI, when presented in a short time frame, mirrored this thinking process as well. To expect that I could enter into the organization and provide an experiential snapshot for a new way of being that would support sustained transformation was naïve at best. Such a view, I think, emerged from a frame that was habituated to understanding knowledge as objective and a vocabulary that reinforced this mental model. Such knowledge was easily taught and my expectation was that it could be implemented immediately or with focused practice. This reflected the more traditional definition for learning as acquiring knowledge from the experts. The student learns content and process from the knowledgeable teacher; the organization learns from the external consultant.
Peters and Armstrong (1998b) refer to this kind of teaching and learning as Type I: teaching by transmission and learning by reception. Despite my efforts to think differently, I believe this definition was descriptive of the frame that I brought to my consulting actions. I did not think it was effective, however, for making sense of the generative and iterative actions needed during the design and destiny phases of AI. At this point in the change process for an organization, we are not talking about implementing a pre-existing product or piece of knowledge, but rather inventing a whole new way of going on together that fits their own, unique vision. Such generative knowledge is what Peters and Armstrong refer to as Type III teaching and learning; it is collaborative in nature. Those engaged in the organization actually co-create new ways of going on to achieve their goals. Design and destiny are repeatedly informed by the ongoing organizational narrative and the outcome or goal that is the focus of the discovery and dream phases of the 5D cycle; knowledge about how to go on together is generated repeatedly within this cycle through conversation.

Post-Modern Organizing

This way of understanding organizing reflects a post-modern worldview in which reality unfolds through social interaction, and the distinction between human (subject) and world (object) disappears as they merge into a wholeness. The philosophical traditions of hermeneutics and existential phenomenology inform this ontology (Cooperrider & Shrivastva, 1987; Ericson, 2007; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The philosophy of existential phenomenology says that we are not seen apart from our experience of the world nor is the world seen separately from our experience of it; the two stand united in the wholeness of the phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 2003;
Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Valle & Halling, 1989). For the organization, this suggests that we cannot separate the members of an organization from the organization itself; they co-create one another. To add to the complexity, philosophical hermeneutics suggests all interaction is situated not only in the history of the organization, but also the relative histories of each organizational member (Ericson, 2007). Learning and transformation occur over time and within the context of conversations through the interactions of organizational members; it is complex and evolutionary in nature.

Intellectually I shared this ontology; however, I seemed to be caught between two worldviews. My experience of being-in-the-world seemed more closely aligned with a positivist worldview. I found myself thinking like a traditional consultant when it came to my actions, believing it was my responsibility to enter the organization with a definitive answer for what they should do. Organizations historically have hired consultants as expert outside advisors to tell them what to do in order to be better at what they do. There is a problem and a solution, a beginning and an ending point. I held an intellectual appreciation that the desired approach was to work with them to evolve their way of organizing so that they could collaboratively create and recreate themselves in response to change and challenge, but I did not know how to do this. I searched for the answers to their questions independently and often outside of our conversations, looking to my fellow AI practitioners for solutions (external knowledge) hoping to adopt their way of working (implement the solution). I was trying to create post-modern solutions from a positivist perspective.

I cannot speak for my colleagues; however, much of the language and action in the AI community reflects a similar dichotomy. The use of terms that reflect Type I consulting and
learning and the more positivistic approaches to *design* and *destiny* reveal what may be our own internal struggle as we dance around the vision for a new way of organizing (what we are calling Strength-Based Organizing) and the means for creating that organizational design.

The idea that we consciously co-create our social systems through our conversations and shared action, which is the vision for how SBOs function, means that we jointly—collaboratively—share in this process (Anderson *et al*; Bruffee, 1993; Gergen, 1994; Gergen, 1999; Gergen & Gergen, 2004; Peters & Armstrong, 1998a, 1998b). We do not do it once and we are done; we are continuously creating or recreating in the moment with others. With regards to organizing, the generation of new knowledge must occur as a collaborative effort and it is inherently relational (Anderson & Jensen, 2006; Gergen, 1994; Gergen, 1999; Gergen & Gergen, 2004; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Peters & Armstrong, 1998a, 1998b). This way forward is not linear, solutions do not lie outside of those who are engaged in the process but rather are created by them. Any solution to problems or challenges will be generated by those engaged in the context. AI is grounded in this worldview and promises to in some way support SBOs, but the way is allusive.

AI has been referred to as action research, a form of research in which the researcher(s) engage in a reflective process oriented towards action or cycles of action and reflection (Herr & Anderson, 2005) for the purpose of learning or generating new knowledge. Inquiry is certainly an ingredient in generating knowledge intentionally and the 5D cycle was intended to make generative inquiry in an organization iterative. What appeared to be a solution, however, in fact brought me full circle back to my stimulus for launching an inquiry into my practice. The
Appreciative Inquiry 5D cycle as a form of action research was designed to facilitate the challenging process of double loop learning and second order change (Ludema et al., 2006).

Double loop learning, according to Argyris, is a practice to support the alignment of action with espoused theory. The goal is to uncover hidden underlying values and assumptions antithetical to espoused theory and bring them into congruence with the theory one advocates (1976). Such learning is focused on individual change. For organizations to succeed in transformation, second order change is required (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). Bartunek and Moch suggest members of an organization share a framework for understanding events (called schemata). First order changes in an organization result in incremental changes within a given schemata. Second-order change requires change in the schemata that result in understanding events in new ways. They go on to suggest that third-order change gives an organization the ability to change schemata as events require. This is the design change that is needed if organizations are to consciously create new ways of organizing and going on together (Cooperrider & Shrivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Ludema et al., 2006).

Organizations using AI to transform the culture in this way, however, are more often than not unsuccessful. AI and the 5D cycle seem most often to be used as a tool, just another action research approach for planning and incremental change. Something is missing if AI is going to be an effective practice for second- and third-order change. My practical questions were: how could I come to deeply appreciate and understand what it means to regularly reflect on and challenge my own mental models and how could I develop ways to facilitate this process for others?
Chapter Three

A Practical Theory for Action

In essence, my challenge was to learn to act congruent with my post-modern ontology. It seemed that this would require increasing my capacity to see my own mental model(s) and to develop the ability to act with an awareness of those models: to be reflective-in-action. It seemed to me that expanding my own range of vision would be one way to do this. Learning to be in the world in this way would mean practicing the art of stepping back and reflecting until it became almost habitual: first on my own frame(s) that influenced my practice and second on my relationship with my clients as well as AI, EL, and how they were relevant to my practice. This surely would require a continuous “attitude of inquiry” (Marshall & Reason, 2007) and a practical approach that was ordered and progressive. If my analysis was correct, I needed not only a practical way to step back and look at my actions, but also a means for reflecting on my frame and recognizing how that frame related to my actions; how it influenced the systems in which I participated. These two steps would have allowed me to see my own mental model, but they would not have been sufficient to help me find new ways of going forward. To discover a new way of working through the design and destiny process, I would need to explore other possible ways of understanding the situation and my relationship to it in order to develop new schemata from which to act.

Levelising

Peters’ levelising model (2005) provided a process for doing just this. His model offered a practical means for stepping back and reflecting on the ways we engage with one another. For
me, the four levels offered a means for practicing mindfulness in my work with clients, helping me see myself in action and understand how those actions originated in order that I might expand my perception and the possibilities for action. Let me explain.

In *Pre-Reflective Being in the World*, Level I, Peters and Ragland (2005) suggest that individuals are fully engaged with other people and their environment; awareness is directed outward. They listen and respond from within their frame and from within the moment, and without any awareness of framing. In Level II, *Reflective Being*, individuals step back and consider their actions. Typically this occurs when something happens to call attention to one’s actions—for example a difference in perception, a conflict, or a simple question that prompts one to pause and step back in order to see what more is there. This is essentially the level in which I had been practicing with my clients. I was reflecting on my actions, trying to find solutions to my dilemma, but all of the solutions I was generating lay within my mental model(s) for AI and being in the world. What was needed was Level III reflection, *Framing the Experience*, where the challenge was to become aware of myself acting from my frame.

I believed that I could do this to some extent on my own through journaling, but it would be difficult, if not impossible, to recognize my own hidden assumptions. Without a stimulus to discover these schemas, I would not be able to consider their influence on my perspective. I thought that active participation with others interested in the same topic had the potential to expose my hidden assumptions and generate a broader inquiry as well as introduce multiple ways of knowing; for much as my colleagues and I may think alike, I was sure we would also think differently from one another. (Little did I know at the time just how different our perspectives would be!)
By committing jointly to a systematic process for exploring our assumptions and beliefs, our frames and our actions, I thought our differences would support insight into my own actions. This would be achieved through dialogical practices including listening and asking back in order to discover what was there: unseen and unspoken. I felt that suspending our beliefs and thinking processes in order to truly examine them and open them up for others to see would be important in this reflection process.

This step actually mirrored my understanding of the definition of design in the AI 5D process: the idea is to step back and see how particular organizational structures (akin to mental models) influence actions and outcomes and then create, recreate, or modify these structures so that they will support the desired outcome. The difference is that levelising, as it is described, is focused on the individual and the relationships that generate the organizational structure. (This turns out to be an early insight that resurfaces in my research.)

In Theorizing, Level IV, I would have the opportunity to shift perspectives again by thinking about frames and how they are constructed. Working collaboratively would expose me to other frames and perspectives. Understanding how others experience what is required for design and destiny had the potential to expand my own experience of what was possible and to look at framing and ways of acting as they are related to context and desired outcomes for an organization. I thought that as we inquired into how each of our frames generated a range of possible actions and looked at the potential impact of those actions, opportunities for alternative possibilities for how to go on might emerge. At level IV my colleagues and I should have been able to think about thinking, to think critically about our own and others’ frames, and consider how theories and frames shape our experience of the world (Peters & Ragland, 2005; Ragland,
2004). From this perspective, we could explore different theories or frames that might help organizations experience their co-constructive, emergent nature.

A collaborative learning group engaged in levelising would be a group of people engaged in a process designed to generate learning and action, which is the intent and outcome of all action research. This specific reflective practice process—levelising—had the potential to engage a group of people in looking at their practice from various points of view, including a participant-observer perspective (seeing their actions as influenced by their frame of reference). This held the promise of insight and possibility.

I planned to convene such a group and engage in on-line dialogue. Providing my colleagues and I participated in successful on-line dialogical practice—mutual respect, openness, willingness to suspend beliefs and assumptions (Bohm, 2004; Isaacs, 2000)—and maintained an attitude of inquiry—curiosity, willingness to explore and articulate purposes, humility, participation, and radical empiricism (Marshall & Reason, 2007)—we would have the opportunity to consider new ways to approach design and destiny. By stepping back, suspending assumptions and beliefs, and looking at how we were participating from within our current perception, my practical theory was that we would be privy to additional information and potentially new relational contexts for appreciating what was going on. This new experience of the phenomena (design and destiny) would provide an opportunity for a shift in our understanding, which just might allow for innovative ways to approach our goals to emerge (or at the very least, understand why our present actions were not effective).

In theory, bringing these new insights and experiences back to the on-line dialogue for levels of reflection would support progressive examination of our actions and our frames, always
with regards to our actual and intended outcome(s). My theory was that this repeated process of practice and reflection on our practice would generate both evolving change in our thinking about and understanding of design and destiny as well as improved skill in levelising, which might result in greater congruence between my ontological beliefs and my practice.

**Plan of Action**

Based upon my practical theory, I decided to engage in a collaborative learning practice with eight fellow AI practitioners who were also interested in expanding their knowledge around AI, design and destiny. I participated in a routine practice of levelising in three ways: (1) in a personal reflective practice that included meditation and journaling where I paid special attention to times when I was actually levelising in the moment of my practice (reflection-in-action); (2) during teleconference calls with my collaborative learning group, and (3) in an eight-month asynchronous on-line dialogue with my colleagues. The on-line format allowed us to share documents in addition to our on-going dialogue. I supported my reflective practice by reading a broad spectrum of resources related to reflective practice and organizational change: action research, organizational design, mindfulness, Spiral Dynamics Integral (Beck & Cowan, 1996), Theory U (Scharmer, 2007) and other topics that surfaced during my research. In addition, I attended courses or workshops related to organizational design, dialogue, and reflective practice.

My plan included introducing my colleagues to the on-line format, sending them information about levelising and developing a shared understanding for how we would practice dialogue, inquiry, and levelising both on-line and in teleconference calls. I anticipated that participants would commit to a collaboration agreeing to participate regularly in the on-line
dialogue and to routinely put into practice newly generated ideas that they believed would benefit their clients. During that time, I would work to maintain and foster an ‘attitude of inquiry’ as described by Marshall and Reason (2007).

Though I was formally the facilitator, I attempted to share the facilitation role so that I might be, to the fullest extent possible, a participant-observer in our collaborative learning effort. To this end, during our initial introduction/orientation, I encouraged my colleagues to see themselves as participant-observers as well, stepping into the facilitator role as the opportunity presented itself. I anticipated that I was more likely to be positioned as the facilitator during our conversations, as the participants would look for someone to manage the dialogues and I would be the most likely candidate since I was the primary researcher. As it turned out, our practice required a facilitator committed to initiating inquiry and dialogue on a regular basis.
Chapter Four

Research Design and Procedures

My research design needed to mesh with the idea that my AI colleagues and I were particularly interested in investigating how our own actions and thinking might change as a result of our participation in the kind of collaborative learning experience discussed in Chapter Three. This reflects the essence of action research; research grounded in “action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). My research directly involved other participants who shared my same area of professional practice, making it what Reason and Torbert (2001) call second-person action research, it has also been referred to as cooperative inquiry (Reason, 2003; Reason & Heron, 1995), meaning that I did research with other professional practitioners rather than on them.

Based upon my practical theory, I hypothesized that iterative cycles of action and reflection would lead to changes in our understanding of design and destiny and to new actions to facilitate these processes. In addition, because I suspected that the actual practice of levelising might be directly related to effectively facilitating design and destiny, I was also interested in studying the actual experience of participation in our collaborative practice. Thus, my research questions were:

1. What will be the nature of our experience of using levelising in an on-line collaborative learning practice with a focus on the design and destiny of organizing?
2. How, if at all, will the iterative practice of levelising in our on-line collaborative learning group relate to our understanding of the design and destiny process of the AI 5D cycle?

3. How, if at all, will the iterative practice of levelising in our on-line collaborative learning group relate to our facilitation of the design and destiny process of the AI 5D cycle?

**Philosophical Foundations**

What makes this particular form of research applicable to my research questions and relevant to those who are interested in post-modern organizational learning and change is both its potential practical application in the field and its alignment with a post-modernism. The post-modern epistemological worldview holds that reality is generated through social conversation (Gergen, 1994; Gergen, 1999; Gergen & Gergen, 2004; Peters & Armstrong, 1998a;), where what we know comes through our experience of being-in-the-world and how we individually and jointly make sense of those experiences (McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Pollio et al., 1997; Shotter, 1994, 2003; Wenger, 1999 or 1998). My research, grounded in this philosophy and designed in accordance with this worldview, had the potential to bring to light a practical means for post-modern organizations to effect change from within. Therefore, my research design needed to provide the opportunity for me to study the results of our actions and conversations as well as our actual lived experience of engaging in our practice together.

Studying my own and other participants’ accounts of our lived experiences suggested a qualitative approach that would allow me to use participants’ descriptions of first-hand
experience as the primary data source for analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Yin, 2003), and specifically a phenomenological methodology (Creswell, 1998; Merleau-Ponty, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Pollio et al., 1997; Yin, 2003). I supplemented the open-ended phenomenological interview procedure, which provided data on the lived experiences of participation in the practice, with semi-structured interview questions designed to uncover participants’ understanding and practice.

**Participants**

I worked with eight experienced AI practitioners. I invited five of these practitioners from among my colleagues (Sue, Matt, Max, Judy, and Tom); three of my colleagues specifically asked to participate in the practice (Terri, Betty, and Sam). All of these participants met the following criteria:

- A reflective nature, as experienced in my past interactions with them.
- A minimum of five years using AI in their consulting practice.
- A personal and professional interest in expanding their own understanding of the design and destiny process of an AI approach to organizational change.
- A willingness to commit to at least six months of engagement, including active participation in conference calls, on-line dialogue (minimum of two postings per week), and closing interviews.

I obtained IRB approval and had each of the participants sign an informed consent form. Although the participants knew one another, they were all told that when it came to
disseminating information about my research, they would be assured of confidentiality in that
all names would be changed to pseudonyms and other personally identifying information would
be excluded. Following this, we engaged in praxis as described in the Chapter Three.

**Collection of Data**

My data came from four sources that converged in triangulating fashion (Creswell, 1998;
Yin, 2003):

1. Participants’ experience, as reflected in individual interviews.
2. My own reflective journal/field notes.
3. Transcripts from teleconference calls.
4. Transcripts from the on-line dialogue.

The first set of data, participant interviews, was used to answer my first research question
concerning our individual experience of participating in the collaborative learning process.
Additional data from these interviews was used to answer my second and third research question
regarding the relationship of the collaborative learning process to changes in understanding and
facilitation. These additional data sources triangulated my first data set, thus increasing my
ability to interpret the interview results.

**Bracketing Interview**

In order to identify my own biases and assumptions in an effort to minimize their effect
on my data collection (Moustakas, 1994; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Yin, 2003), prior to the start of
the research I participated in a bracketing interview. The interview was performed by a member
of the Phenomenology Research Group, an interpretative research group at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Yin (2003) suggests that bracketing interviews enable the researcher to be more responsive to data that might contradict her own views; this was certainly the case for me. My strong belief that regular and consistent levelising would effect a change in everyone’s understanding and subsequent professional practice was apparent during my interview. My assumptions that everyone would participate equally and fully and that we would jointly come to some shared understanding about ways to support the on-going, iterative practice of co-construction within organizations was also noted. A background assumption that surfaced was that all participants would share a common understanding about the nature of design and destiny and that we would begin our explorations from there. This assumption was challenged during our first on-line dialogue, and from there it became apparent that although we shared the broad framework of Appreciative Inquiry, the understandings and professional practices within that field were diverse. This turned out to be a stumbling block to achieving my broader assumption that we would develop shared ideas about how to facilitate design and destiny.

During my bracketing interview, it also became clear that a primary motivation for this research was my desire to increase my competence as an organizational consultant, especially as it related to facilitating change in organizational culture and design. I assumed my research would increase my knowledge in this area and fuel my credentials. The irony is that the research, though successful in at least increasing my sense of competence, has reawakened my passion for addressing issues related to youth, and I am now motivated to engage community members and educators in a collaborative learning practice to design classrooms, schools and communities as living, evolving, exciting places for young people to grow and learn.
At the end of eight months, I interviewed each of the participants to obtain a rich description of their experience. I began by asking each the phenomenological question: What was this experience like for you? I then asked follow-up questions, based on the responses given to my initial and subsequent questions, seeking clarification and unveiling backgrounded assumptions, thoughts, and experiences. This portion of the interview addressed my first research question.

Subsequent to this part of the interview, I asked two semi-structured questions to gather data related to my second and third research questions:

1. How, if at all, has this experience changed your understanding of design and destiny, and what, if anything, did our collaborative learning praxis contribute to that change?

2. How, if at all, has this experience changed your facilitation of design and destiny, and what, if anything, did our collaborative learning praxis contribute to that change?

I asked probing and follow-up questions as needed in response to the interviewee’s answer to each question.

Each of these interviews was held via telephone and audiotaped. I made field notes during and immediately following each interview. The recordings were transcribed soon after the interviews by a paid transcriptionist. I read her transcription while listening to the tapes for accuracy, and I noted any important non-verbal acts as well as added in relevant data from my field notes. These were shared with each participant. I asked them to remove any portion that
they felt personally identified them or that they did not want revealed in my research. I subsequently gave each participant a pseudonym.

Supporting Data

I kept my reflective journal both on-line and in a hand written notebook. This journal served as a means for capturing my observations as well as my reflections on our conversations, my reading, my own work, and the courses and workshops I took during the eight months. I also made notes on my observations, impressions, and thoughts following our conversations and interviews, making sure to listen for multiple modalities—tone of voice, intuition, energy, pauses, and sighs. This included both “descriptive notes—word-pictures describing the setting, people, conversation, and actions as they happened, and reflective notes—frame of mind, ideas, and concerns” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I audiotaped two of our teleconference calls, which were also transcribed verbatim for analysis in similar fashion as the interviews.

Online Forums for Dialogue

In our search for a conversational forum that met everyone’s needs and comfort levels a variety of online, asynchronous modalities were used. All on-line modalities provided verbatim supporting data. We started with a web log for our on-line dialogue, specifically www.vox.com¹. The initial choice for using a web log, as opposed to other on-line communication methods, were all related to data management, participant access, and cost:

¹ http://www.vox.com is an on-line web log available without charge to the public.
- We could have different threads or topics of conversation at the same time, stored separately for ease in analysis.

- We were assured that everyone always had access to every posting any time and anywhere they had access to a computer.

- It was easy to look back and see a train of thought/conversation.

- We could create a library for documents: articles, client documents and presentations, and Web links.

In addition, the benefits of using vox.com were (1) *members only* groups could be formed, thus allowing private dialogue, and (2) every time a posting was made, participants were notified via email, which contained an easy access link to the Web log. This served as a reminder to participants to visit and contribute to the on-line conversation.

Within the first week, even before our first scheduled conference call, several participants found the Web log frustrating and confusing as a means for dialogue among a number of people. In time for our conference call, I switched online formats, introducing participants to a private wiki on the Internet: www.pbwiki.com. This had all the advantages of the Web log, plus it was easier to navigate, offered simple user instructions, and had several meeting tools, including a calendar. During our first call, we spent time navigating the site together. I answered questions as people tried out the different options available on the site.

After our first session, everyone seemed comfortable with navigation and use of the wiki, and we turn fully to this forum for dialogue. Within a few weeks, however, frustration and disadvantages began to emerge. Participants voiced a variety of concerns and irritations: (1) losing their entries, (2) confusion over changes that were made to documents, (3) the
inconvenience of having to go to the wiki, (4) the difficulty of following the various dialogues, and (5) the challenge of asynchronous, written dialogue with so many people. A two-week on-line dialogue resulted in a decision to use email as the primary modality, with the wiki as back up and periodic conference calls to more fully engage those who were finding on-line dialogue extremely challenging. I agreed to piece together sequentially our email conversations into one document, which I emailed to each participant as well as posted to the wiki.

After three months participants abandoned the wiki and conversed primarily via email. Occasionally someone asked me to summarize the conversations; however, I was reticent to reduce anyone’s words to my understanding. Instead I continued to piece together email conversations so that threads within the dialogue followed one another. I sent these directly to each of the participants.

We held three additional conference calls. Finding a time when most people were available was challenging. I decided to ask people to mark their available times over a two-week period and I scheduled calls when the greatest number of people was available.

We began our collaborative learning group in early September 2007 and completed our final dialogue in early April 2008. Closing interviews were completed in late April-early May and transcribed in early June. The table below provides a summary of participant participation.

**Our Practice Together**

I sent each participant a copy of Peters’ article on levelising prior to the start of our conversations. In our first call, we discussed the article and our plans to support one another in reflection, moving back and forth between the levels as we explored organizational *design* and
*destiny.* In our first on-line conversation, we discovered we did not have shared meaning about the focus of our conversations or in the terminology we were using. We explored our various ways of understanding *design* and *destiny,* surfacing differences in our desired focus as well as our understanding of both of these terms. Participants’ interest ranged from the practical facilitation of *design* and *destiny* in an AI Summit to facilitating the whole systems design of an organization. We concluded with a decision to focus on whole systems design. This is the point at which we began to lose two participants who were more interested in the practical applications of *design* and *destiny.*

I had hoped that participants would step forward on their own to initiate and facilitate conversations, but this did not occur. Our practice required one person to hold the space and open the conversation on *design* topics that emerged in our dialogues. I selected these topics based upon our conversations and the articles that were being shared. In addition, I invited conversation on other topics that surfaced in my reading and coursework that were relevant to conscious and intentional organizational design. Table 1 below identifies the month in which our dialogues occurred as well as the focus of these conversations.

Once an invitation was initiated, participants willingly engaged in these conversations. Over the course of the eight months we engaged in 15 conversations. Four participants (Judy, Max, Sue, and I) shared a number of articles related to organizational design, organizational development, Appreciative Inquiry, participatory management, and inquiry that supported reflection on action and reflection in action.
Table 1: Topics of Conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation Date</th>
<th>Focus of Conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On-line dialogues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Hierarchy and 5D Process when it comes to Design and Destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Process Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Design Science and Design Frame Perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Using Talents and Strengths in Design Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Designing and the Design Process; Collaboratively Designing the Design Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Co-construction and evolutionary design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Design and Readiness for Becoming an SBO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teleconference Calls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>The Individual, Human Development and Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Hierarchy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participation Rates**

For a variety of reasons, participation was not consistent across the board. Judy, Betty, and Matt stayed fully engaged in the practice for the duration of the research, regardless of conversational forum, participating in 75% or more of all substantive dialogues and conversations from September through April. Sue participated in 80% of the substantive on-line dialogues and none of the teleconference calls or administrative conversations. Max was fully engaged up through January, participating in almost 100% of the substantive conversations. Subsequently, for work-related reasons, he found he no longer had time to stay engaged. For a variety of reasons, Terri, Sam, and Tom were minimally involved in the project, engaging in 25% or fewer of the overall substantive conversations (see Table 2 page 29).
Sue, who was the senior and most experienced participant, with 40 years as an organizational development consultant, did not participate in the initial conversations that were more administrative and functional. They included what communication forum were we going to use and how participants understood the focus of our practice. She entered the conversation to clarify, from her point of view, the two broad directions the conversation could take: (1) design and destiny phases of an AI Summit or organizational design. She was interested in the latter, exploring whole systems design that included a conscious iterative internal practice to support continuous learning and evolution. The majority of the participants concurred that this more complex focus was their interest as well.

The final decision to focus on the more theoretical aspects of designing organizations as intentional and self-determining resulted in the withdrawal of two participants, Sam and Terri. Sam’s engagement was limited to teleconference calls. The focus of the dialogue was not aligned with her interest. It is worth noting, I think, that both Sam and Terri asked to participate in my research. I agreed based upon their experience in the field and my assumption that they understood the intended focus of our practice in the same way that I did.

**Process and Procedures for Data Analysis**

**Phenomenological Interviews**

I analyzed the interview transcripts following the thematic analysis proposed by Thomas & Pollio (2002, p. 35-37):
### Table 2: Participation in Conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Administration and Logistical Conversations</th>
<th>Substantive On-line Dialogues</th>
<th>Substantive Teleconference Dialogues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
<td>**</td>
<td>** Substantive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Sue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- **Substantive On-line Dialogues**
  - Sept: 3 participants (100%)
  - Oct: 3 participants (100%)
  - Nov: 8 participants (86%)
  - Dec: 7 participants (86%)
  - Jan: 4 participants (50%)
  - Feb: 2 participants (50%)

- **Substantive Teleconference Dialogues**
  - Sept: 3 participants (100%)
  - Oct: 3 participants (100%)
  - Nov: 5 participants (83.33%)
  - Dec: 4 participants (66.67%)
  - Jan: 2 participants (33.33%)
  - Feb: 2 participants (33.33%)

- **Overall Participation:**
  - 75% for Substantive
  - 80% for Overall
1. I read each complete transcript and made note of specific aspects that stood out as significant, generating meaning units as they related to the overall experience.

2. I looked for recurring patterns in the data, looking at words and meanings within the context of the whole, including attention to metaphors and other symbolic language.

3. I reread each transcript in order to cluster initial thematic meaning, then reread for a sense of the whole and for meaning units.

4. I developed thematic descriptions of each transcript. I questioned and challenged themes to be sure they were supported by the text.

5. I looked for general thematic descriptions and sought commonalities across descriptions.

6. I validated global themes making sure they were present in each individual transcript. I developed an overall thematic structure and reported this to the research group.

7. I presented the thematic structure to participants to make sure that it reflected their experience.

To make sure my analysis was unbiased, I had an outside interpretive researcher analyze Tom’s interview to see if her analysis corresponded with mine. The outside researcher identified the same themes in the interview that I had identified. She wondered about Tom’s participation in a way that I had not. She was suspicious of his open admission about his lack of participation and considered his comments as reflective of either not caring or a sense that his own work was more important than this practice, which he’d committed to.

This points out how important backgrounding information and frame of reference can be to understanding the meaning of the words someone uses to describe their experience. It also
suggests the listener’s frame is equally important to understanding what someone says. In this case, the outside interpretive researcher heard backgrounding in Tom’s words that did not reflect Tom’s experience. I had the advantage of knowing the details of the work that Tom was doing and that his responses in the interview were not meant to in any way devalue or disparage the practice. The researcher and I reviewed the interview after I provided her with the background information that Tom had fully participated in the on-line forum during the first two months, participated in a teleconference call the third month; and that after the holidays he was preparing for an upcoming three-month around the world training tour. With this information, she reflected on the interview and eliminated her negative interpretation. With this, she reconfirmed my original analysis of the themes in Tom’s interview.

Field Notes, On-line Transcripts, and Teleconference Calls

All other data has been used to identify illuminating examples and to add depth to the interviews. I used a systematic approach to analyze the data, looking for narratives and observations related to participant experience. I analyzed the data in the following way:

1. I read through transcripts and field notes highlighting statements, sentences or quotes from participants regarding changes in their understanding or action as well as those that stood out as relevant to understanding and/or facilitating design and destiny.

2. I reread transcripts and field notes, highlighting statements, sentences or quotes that related to the thematic structure of individual experiences as analyzed above.

3. I reread transcripts and field notes looking for statements, sentences, or quotes that contradicted individual perceived experience.
4. I compared the above data to transcripts from individual interviews to identify consistencies or inconsistencies in accounts.

5. I developed an overall thematic structure for the changes in understanding and facilitation.

6. I presented the thematic structure to participants to make sure that it reflected their experience.

**Evidence of Levelising in Our Conversations**

To determine the extent to which participants engaged in levelising, I analyzed data from the eight on-line dialogues that focused on organizational design. I followed the levelising phase definitions used by Gaskin (2007) as criteria for indentifying incidences of levelising in our conversations:

1. Level I reflects discussion: turn taking, “pop-corning”, fragmentation, information sharing, or closed questions.

2. Level II takes such forms as the following: (1) explicit knowledge: reflecting in or reflecting on action, (2) turning towards others and asking into what someone meant, (3) reflecting on the group process: experiences of confusion or suspending assumptions; or (4) conversational structure: silence, conversation slowing down, exploration of a topic.

3. Level 3 includes (1) vocalizing beliefs or values, (2) experiences of a phenomenon, or (3) reflecting on reflecting, (4) revelations.
4. Level 4 demonstrates an openness to think about frames, compare and contrast multiple points of view, question individual and group frames, explore a frame deeply, or to theorize about action.

**Attending to Quality and Validity**

According to Reason and Bradbury (2006), quality action research hinges upon five issues, which can be assessed by asking if the research is:

- Explicit in developing a praxis of relational-participation.
- Guided by reflexive concern for practical outcomes.
- Inclusive of a plurality of knowing.
- Worthy of the term significant.
- Emerging towards a new and enduring infrastructure.

The first three of these were built into my overall design: a collaborative learning praxis using levelising to support multiple ways of knowing in hopes of addressing the concerns related to *design* and *destiny*. As a group, the nine of us engaged in on-line dialogical practice that hinged upon relational-participation. The data below provide evidence of reflexive concern for practical outcomes, so much so that conversations about actual practice were rarely discussed in-depth. As one of our global themes was multiple ways of knowing and diverse perspectives, our research certainly provided evidence for a plurality of knowing.

My research questions specifically relate to the latter two criteria. At the outset, my practical theory was that a regular praxis of levelising with colleagues *would generate both evolving change in our thinking about and understanding of design and destiny as well as*
improved skill in levelising, which might support greater congruence between my ontological beliefs and my practice. I used data from the dialogues and my field notes and journal to triangulate findings from the interviews to satisfy the fourth specification.

I did a number of things to ensure a thorough analysis of the data and contribute to its validity. First of all, I enlisted the support of an interpretive researcher at the outset of my analysis of interviews, which was discussed earlier. Perhaps the most important action I took was to send my analysis to all participants in my research for member checking.

I read and re-read all data, iteratively seeking to identify relevant evidence available through pattern matching and explanation building. In addition, I focused on issues logically related to my research questions and I considered rival or alternative interpretations for the data. Upon completion of the analysis, I sent each participant a copy of the analysis for member checking. Everyone verified that the thematic structure represented their experience of participating in this praxis and that there were no missing themes. Judy was pleased that I had included two of her experiences, both of which stood out for her as peak: (a) her embodied experience of social constructionism and (b) her awareness and interest in finding ways to do what young people do, which is combine synchronous forms of on-line communication with both teleconference calls and asynchronous dialogue.

I personally benefited from holding a variety of positions throughout the collaborative learning process. First of all, I engaged in what Herr and Anderson (2005) refer to as a sole insider position—studying myself through self-reflective practice in my journal, which reflected significant change in my capacity for reflective practice and specifically levelising. I held an insider position in collaboration with other insiders insofar as we were all organization
development consultants using the practice of AI, which resulted in changes in our understanding as cited above. As an insider in collaboration with outsiders, I brought my practical experience and learning gained with my research group into my own organization, where it significantly shifted the way I engaged with my business partner and practiced within and without my organization. Finally, I engaged as an outsider in collaboration with insiders in my role as consultant and coach with clients in my practice. I brought changes in my perspective and thinking gained with my fellow researchers into my client organizations as a way of putting new theory into practice.
Chapter Five

Findings

In this chapter I present my findings as they relate to each research question. My research focused on the experience of participants, including my own, and any changes in our understanding and facilitation of AI, design and destiny that occurred during our practice. I begin with findings related to my first research question; this includes identifying levels of dialogue found in our on-line conversations, followed by the themes related to the experience of our levelising practice that emerged in the interviews. Then I present findings related to my second and third research questions by identifying the themes that were related to understanding and facilitation, based on the interviews. All italicized words are actual quotes from participants. Underscored words represent oral emphasis given by the speaker during their interview.

The Experience

Research Question #1: What will be the nature of our experience of using levelising in an on-line collaborative learning practice with a focus on the design and destiny of organizing?

Levelising

Our first few administrative conversations in September were predominantly Level I and II. Level I comments related to personal preferences, points of view about design and destiny, and individual experiences with our on-line forums. Level II comments surfaced as we realized we had different points of view on design and destiny, with participants asking one another about
those views. Dialogue containing reflections from participants about their practice or clarifying the meaning of comments also reflected level II:

Max: *Our biggest challenge ... continues to be transforming our hierarchical culture.*

*While it was our intent that folks see Ai as a philosophy/mindset to frame all of their interactions (akin to Jackie’s and Cheri’s book on Dynamic Relationships), apparently almost all left the summits seeing it as a technique that was useful in the broader context, but not in addressing local issues.*

Once we moved into conversations that were focused on organizational design, however, our dialogue flowed across all four levels. We engaged in Level III dialogue as we explored multiple ways of understanding, which often brought new understandings and insights. For example:

Judy: *I'm curious to hear everyone else's experiences around Max's point re a lot of dialogue with individuals in order to get some (often key) people engaged. I have found this to be true, yet am not aware of much in our AI case literature about it, though there may well be. My sense is this is another "hidden success ingredient" in many AI and OD success stories.*

At level IV we realized how the nature of our frame was impacting our way of speaking and understanding. We engaged in Level IV as we both explored and openly challenged one another’s frames and jointly sought new ways of perceiving both design and organizations. For example:

Sue: *I want to piggy back on Steve’s comment about sustainability. That’s a word with many meanings. For me, I DON’T WANT my clients to sustain our work if that means*
staying static – and yet that seems to be what many people in our field want i.e., for the client system to stay the way it is after a given “intervention”. Such a meaning of sustainability makes no sense to me. I’d much rather have the work that we did endure in a non static way i.e., built upon, evolved and adapted with time.

The transitions in our dialogue from level to level seemed natural and fluid. Questions and challenges appeared to be received openly and without defense, which seemed to invite deeper inquiry and exploration. I analyzed each of our eight on-line dialogues on organizational design. For each dialogue, I first identified segments of each email entry; each segment representing a new thought, concept, description, or question from participants. I then scored each segment as level I, II, III, or IV using Gaskin’s criteria. I added the total number of segments for each level and divided them by the total segments for the entire dialogue. This resulted in a percentage figure for each level of the dialogue. The data in Table 3 shows

Table 3: Levelising Activity in Our On-Line Dialogues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Date of Conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level I</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level II</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level III</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level IV</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the percentage of dialogue occurring at each level for the eight on-line dialogues. The data indicate that participants engaged in all four levels of dialogue in all of our conversations. In six of our conversations we spent the majority of time at levels III and IV.

**Themes**

My first interview question for the participants was: *What was this experience like for you?* Thematic analysis of this phenomenological question revealed six global themes.

Participant’s descriptions of their experience fell broadly into the following areas:

1. Participation
2. Chaotic, Frustrating, Challenging, Overwhelming Process
3. Various Forums for Dialogue
4. Exhilarating, Energizing, Meaningful, Enriching Interaction
5. Differences in Frames and Meaning-Making
6. Experiences Related to Collaborative Learning

My findings are organized according to source of data; for each theme the interview findings are followed by excerpts from our actual dialogues and my field notes.

1. Participation

*Interviews*

Participants commented on their own ability to participate as well as their observations about the presence or absence of others in the group. Those who commented about their own level of participation (Tom, Terri, Sam, Matt, and Max) focused primarily on their absence of involvement. For Tom, Matt, and Max their lack of participation was work related; they did not have the time to process and respond to the depth of the dialogue. For Terri and Sam, the online modality was incompatible with their preferences for engaging in this kind of deep dialogue, and for Terri, it turned out she was not interested in the direction of the conversations. Judy, Sue, and
Max commented on the fact that people were absent from the dialogue and that this was never a discussion point among the group; each person instead developed their own story about why they were absent.

   Judy: *You know there were people we got started with but seemed to drop out, drop off maybe because they didn’t like the topics or maybe it became too academic or I am not really sure what happened, but I noticed that they were missing and there was no sort of recognition that people were missing and what was happening. Those types of observations I think would be helpful to have. And then it becomes easy in the virtual medium to either not notice the people aren’t there and not wonder why not, or to notice they are not there and to sort of speculate as to why not or sort of fill in the blanks and create interpretations of that when it really may be: “I am too busy”, but sort of like, well, what happened in the beginning when you knew this was something that you were going to do, so you know, just no sort of dialogue around that aspect of things.*

   Sue: *I think part of it is that we’re dealing with a cohort of colleagues who are not very comfortable with technology and the technology is just emerging.*

   Terri, Sam, and Tom were the least present in the conversations, especially after the first two-three months. The nature of an asynchronous virtual forum and the focus of the conversations were deterrents for Terri’s and Sam’s participation:

   Terri: *So really long emails, get to me, when they’re from and between several people And I can’t make sense out of it. (It maybe a judging / perceiving kind of thing on the Meyers Briggs) that when people put out so many words as they are in process, it*
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contributes to my not being able to follow along. It’s like I see long stuff and I go, “oh my god, please . . . “I don’t want to say I can’t do it. I’d rather say I hate doing it, and I hate doing it so much that I don’t do it. I probably can do it but I hate it.

All three felt that the topic either needed to be inherently of interest or the stakes needed to be higher in order to stay fully engaged.

Tom: If my life had depended upon it, like I was getting a grade on it or something, I would have put aside maybe hour or two every other day or something and had that in my calendar to do it, but the way it was set up, especially once I got on the road, I couldn’t do it. It all goes back to the topic of importance and what our stakes are in it; and my stakes weren’t high enough, when my stakes elsewhere were higher, to keep me in the daily or even weekly flow of it.

Terri: I have to really, really, really have an incentive to want to do this. And I think that went back to my original response to the question, which was that at some point I become disinterested in the conversation, and/or I thought I was disinterested, and therefore did not read to find if I would be interested in this one little thread.

Surprisingly, however, Tom reported a level of engagement that had contributed enormously to his work. From the “outside” it appeared as if he was not participating in the project, but from his vantage point, he was engaged. Even though he was not participating in the dialogue, he was in fact, actively reading the dialogue and listening for how it pertained to the work he was doing:
Tom: I wasn’t in anyway dissatisfied, uninterested, disinterested in continuing or anything, but it was a matter of, for me, to do that level of thought I have to stop what else I am doing. I loved reading it. I felt that it was an enormous contribution to me, and I loved responding to it; I just didn’t have the time to do it. I feel like I got an enormous amount out of it, and I feel that I contributed very little; so, I feel like I was the winner in this. I just got so much out of this that I am really going to profit from.

Dialogues

The participation theme emerged in the conversations as well. Whenever someone who ordinarily participated was absent, they would comment or explain when they rejoined the conversation:

Judy: I’m really relishing the quality of all the dialogues. Please don’t take my non-response as disinterest. I really do find ALL this dialogue enriching and stimulating and I sense we have shifted to another level.

Matt: Sorry that I’ve been out of touch for so long. The 10 days in Florida followed by 4 days in 5 nights touring the province on an AI initiative the last week of September really threw my schedule out.

Sam: I’m inundated with life and work; haven’t had the time to give this the attention it needs.

Field Notes

My field notes and email communications reflected my own awareness of who was participating and who was not:
Much silence for a while after the conference—too much for folks to do. I think getting started is also difficult.

I am frustrated by the lack of participation by some people. I asked Sue on email today whether she was really busy or just waiting for more substance on the wiki. She said more substance.

Early on I noticed that Terri had dropped out of the conversation and I contacted her first by email and then by phone. She and I had a lengthy phone conversation in which she wondered whether her interests were in line with my dissertation topic (the practical application of design and destiny) and she expressed a desire to talk about something different with the others. I encouraged her to ask her question to the group. I noted in my journal that she actively engaged after our conversation, but when that dialogue ended it was the last she was heard from in the dialogues.

I thought Terri was re-engaged, but she’s gone silent again. Maybe too much work, maybe the medium, maybe the topic, just not interested?

I asked this question to my journal, but did not ask Terri.

My field notes reflected my initial sense of responsibility to make sure people were engaged, which then shifted to frustration that they were not honoring their commitment to be actively engaged and they were not taking responsibility for finding ways to be engaged.

At what point does it cease to be my responsibility to bring the missing people into the conversation? How do you create the environment that has everyone so committed that they take responsibility for making things happen for themselves? Wondering if it is
assumed my responsibility because it is my project. What does this say for practical
application?

At various times my field notes reference the fact that participants did not initiate conversations, they waited for me to take the lead. In my effort not to be the only facilitator, I waited to see if someone else would begin a new thread, hoping someone would step forward, but after several weeks of waiting, I would finally initiate an email.

I guess if conversation is going to happen I need to take the lead on it because no one else does. Does this mean the subject is really off the radar of everyone's work focus?

Once again, I made assumptions or asked myself a question, but did not verbalize the question to the group. (A pattern was clearly emerging that will be addressed in the next chapter.)

2. Chaotic, Frustrating, Challenging, Overwhelming Process

Interviews

Participant’s comments reflect that our practice was extremely demanding. The actual experience of dealing with the open structure and search for an online dialogue forum that would work for everyone was described in one of four ways by participants: chaotic, frustrating, challenging, or overwhelming. At times the distinction between these was more apparent in their tone of voice and intonation than it was in their actual words.

Betty: How people could come and go into the process and how you might start with a question and then we would tangent off here; and we would go where the energy was.

How we tried to use the wiki; how we dealt with emails. Even though I was resistant to having clutter in email, I just found a way of taking everything that was emerging and
creating my system to understand the meaning, and I kept up with the group the best I could.

Terri: It was part of what made me really hopeful about participating in your project, because there were some really great people on that call and I thought, “Wow, if there is anybody with whom I can think this through, these are some really good people to think this through with!” But, I couldn’t think that way. I just couldn’t think that way, and my experience of the approach that we had was that there were a few people who did think well that way. When I am talking to someone and they are thinking out loud, somehow I can separate out the process from the end conclusion; but I can’t seem to do that when I am reading it, because I can’t hear the different inflections in their voice, I can’t hear them say, “don’t mind me right now, I am thinking out loud.” What I hear instead is the back and forth, and the ummmms, and the maybes, and the what-ifs.

The differences in technical skill, comfort level, and interest proved a significant challenge for many. The wiki seemed to work for some, but lack of comfort and frustration with technicalities on the site continued to be a problem for others as noted below. In early October, Sue suggested yet another online forum, which appeared to be a cross between a Web log and a wiki. After exploring the site, I created a forum for us and emailed everyone asking them to sign up so that we could try it. Sue was the only one who responded. Eventually we resorted to email only. Participants’ descriptions of their experience seemed to correlate with their own assessment of their personal styles and preferences and/or to outside commitments to other work. In
addition, several of them mentioned that their expectations for what was going to occur were
different from what actually occurred and this was a source of frustration. For example:

Max: *Everyone has their own style and there is value to offering people an opportunity for
asynchronous conversation. But for me it was hard, and actually the other part which
maybe it’s been hard asking you to do, is can you summarize all this, when there would be
three different emails on the same thread but people would respond to them differently so
you never had the entire thread on one email. I have like a half-inch stack of emails I have
from the last thread I just haven’t had a chance to read.*

Matt: *The email conversations were a little more difficult to stay with I think in large part
because email tends to be a linear process to me, where as a conversation is more 3D, and
so I found sometimes trying to figure out how to best respond to people and also just in
terms of my particular style in the way that I write things up was very cumbersome
because nothing is ever a first draft when I write it, even email.*

Max: *When I had the time to really read through all the postings and assimilate my
thoughts which usually took several hours it really helped move my thinking and in
particular since I spent a lot of time in writing carefully with the hopes of being
understood that, of course, clarified my thinking. I can’t help but think even in direct ways
it really clarified a lot of the thinking and brought me to at least my current state of
clarity.*
Dialogues

The experiences of chaos, frustration, overwhelm and challenge were reflected early on in our on-line dialogues. In September, as we were struggling to find a forum that worked for everyone, there was frustration around the use of the wiki:

Terri: I'm still uncomfortable with this form of communication, and am working hard to adapt.

And into October, the second month of conversation, as people tried to follow the complexity of the conversations:

Judy: The conversation was so generative for me that I could not keep up with the ideas that were whirling around in my brain as you each spoke.

And they continued to surface in the conversations for a couple of months:

Betty: Clarity/Framing needed. Have we now switched to dialogues in email? Are we still using wiki? I'll spend time this morning reviewing the emails but I will respond in Wiki area.

Tom: I was just feeling all proud of myself for reading what you have written by email and wiki in the past 2 weeks or so, until I faced the fact that I have not yet read the recommended articles. Sigh.... I feel caffeine coming on.....So, for the moment, I will have to bounce off of what I am hearing from our group of contributors.
Field Notes

Over the course of the research, my field notes reflected my own experience of all of these thoughts and reactions. In addition, I commented on my observations of others who were expressing their sentiments. I felt responsible for finding a forum that would work best for all of us and was frustrated and disappointed that the forums I thought would work did not work well for everyone:

*The group is challenged by the technology and how to be spontaneous, synchronous and asynchronous, and starting on the same page.*

*At first people were excited about playing with the technology, getting in, seeing what they could do. Some people had a higher tolerance for the challenges and lack of answers on the system. Tom in particular reached a point where she said if she couldn’t figure it out quickly she wouldn’t be able to participate.*

*What I notice is our inability to focus on one thing, X. People are all over the place in their attention. They come in and out without regrouping and then threw out comments. Wondering whether and how to support a dialogue when (a) busy lives focused on many different concepts at once, (b) different frames that take us in tangents and off in other directions. I am REALLY interested in the subject of our dialogue and find myself frustrated by what appears to me to be a lack of focus.*
We are a month into the process and I’m frustrated. Wondering how others are feeling.

I anticipated a richer discussion at this point.

Interestingly, once again, I only asked myself this question; I did not verbalize it. The comments that had been scattered in emails expressing frustration and chaos disappear from my field notes and the online conversation after the end of October, which is when we began to get into rich dialogue and settled into a combination forum of email and the wiki.

3. Various Forums for Dialogue

Interviews

Everyone commented on the challenges associated with virtual communication and that both the wiki and email were less than ideal dialogic forums, but some experienced the downside of it more severely than others. Everyone except Terri and Sam expressed an experience of both pro’s and con’s. For, Terri and Sam, as mentioned above, the deficits led to their disengagement in the practice completely; for Tom, the challenges resulted in partial disengagement. In general, they described the downside of email as conversations that became choppy and moved too rapidly for everyone to have a chance to ask questions and become engaged. In addition, most of them made reference in one way or another to too much information accumulating too fast. Too many contributions with no means for collective sense making of the conversations resulted in the need for long periods of time for people to read through all the emails, sort out the comments and figure out how they could contribute. Matt, Max, Tom, and Betty commented on the nature of the written word and that its permanency was sometimes a detractor; if there was not enough
time to think all the way through something and compose (and recompose) a response, then those ideas were never shared. For Terri and Sam, this translated into disengagement:

Sam: *For me I found long conversations via email were less engaging for me; I would much rather think out loud than engage in that type of conversation via email.*

Terri: *It [email] feels very choppy, for one thing. One person writes a comment, another person writes a long email, then the next person responds to one little piece that is embedded in that long email and the next person maybe responds to the little piece and also to another little piece in the original email . . . and I can’t track the flow. In a conversation, even if people are interrupting one another you can kind of hear the sequence of events; and I can’t do that electronically (or rather, I can’t do that with email). I can have a meaningful conversation with one person by email; but when you add together 6 or 8 people, it’s so choppy I can’t follow the sequence; I can’t ask questions.*

In addition to Terri and Sam, Max, Matt, and Betty referred to their own personal learning styles, preferences and temperaments, suggesting that this format was not the best fit for them. They stayed in the conversations, however, because they found the benefits outweighed the negatives. Their experience of the asynchronous conversation enabled them to participate at their own pace and to have the time to review and reflect on what others wrote before responding. The ability to go back and read someone’s comments and then to take the time to compose their own thoughts supported clarity and break-through thinking for some.
Max: For introverts, including myself, it’s difficult to have deep thoughts during conversations, and that’s what the written stuff allows, but it’s incredibly time consuming to sit down and read through everybody’s stuff and think what that means and make connection. You still get that association, that ah-ha from people’s thoughts and people’s words and you can build on that.

Betty: [Even though I don’t like email], I didn’t want to miss out. I was cutting and pasting the dialogue in word into a date format so I could see it and then find out what points do I have something to offer. I didn’t want to repeat what anybody else was saying, but could I offer something of value.

Sue and Judy seemed comfortable with email, even if it was not the ideal forum for dialogue. Both of them expressed interest in some richer combination:

Judy: It seemed to me after a certain point we abandoned trying to use the wiki, and you know I had kind of stated my preference from the beginning of doing it by email and it being a more immediate form of exchange because it automatically integrates into what I am doing. It would have been great to try out IM during calls; this is what younger people do.

Sue: You know my wish is that we would have found some higher level way of utilizing the wiki or some alternative forum that goes just a little bit beyond email and allows us to, sort of in one place, have the whole thread of a discussion.
As mentioned in chapter four, in addition to our on-line dialogues we had four teleconference calls to provide an opportunity for re-engagement for those whose preference was verbal conversation. During the interviews these calls were referenced in the context of participant’s experience of the conversational forum. For those who participated in those conversations, they found them enriching; the challenge was scheduling and continuity:

Max: *I think that it is a paradox in some respect; on one hand in a conversation you’re forced to think in the moment and respond in the moment, and yet, here I am saying with email its more that I wanted to be able to compose my thinking a bit more. So, it’s inherently a paradoxical comment, I suppose, but I find that it’s just that you pick up timbre and tone in voices. You certainly don’t get the body posture, nonverbal, and that kind of thing, but you get a lot more understanding on how enthusiastic or passionate or whatever a person is about things relative to the subject matter. And I often end up responding to that kind of passion or enthusiasm. And also, it’s funny, but it has a way of jump starting my own imagination in a way that reading the same comments don’t, and I don’t know what that is about; I just know it was true for me.*

Sam: *Well I like the free exchange of ideas [in conversations]. The topics were interesting even though I am not as connected to it right now, I liked hearing about what other people are passionate about and what they are focused on and their thinking on things and building on others’ ideas for me. That’s just a more exciting forum,*

Almost everyone acknowledged that the teleconference calls offered a technically richer conversation and allowed for more cohesion for those who were on the call. In addition, they
experienced greater spontaneity and the ability to slow people down and ask questions. They also commented on the nature of verbal, synchronous conversation; being more fluid and impermanent, it was less inhibiting in terms of sharing ideas without thinking them all the way through. Matt, however, noted that although the calls were more enjoyable and rich, it did not allow for the kind of reflection that the online dialogue did.

Matt: *Advantage of email (both/and) requires reflection and thought that does not happen in a conversation. After the conversation many things will run through my head and I will not have been able to [say them]. In adult learning theory there are many ways and oral is least effective for most people.*

Sue and Judy were most comfortable with the online dialogue, and Sue did not participate in any of the conference calls, other than the initial call. Terri, who was most expressive about her frustration with online dialogue, did not participate in any of the calls after the initial call.

*Dialogues*

Though teleconference conversations were energizing and more fluid for those who participated in them, scheduling was a challenge and consequently they were not a primary forum for dialogue. Those who felt strongly about teleconferences as a forum voiced this during our conversations:

Sam: *Are we going to do more of these? I really enjoy the conversation mode better.*

Judy: *I am noticing that evolving conversational structures are interesting: rich, back and forth, enjoyable. Email—harder to get to reading all the articles. How does this reflect on our work with our organizations? How do we make something pleasurable, value-add, and*
not just more work? Synchronous chat at the same time as aural conversation would be wonderful.

**Field Notes**

My field notes reflect that I experienced the teleconference conversations as isolated events. The calls occurred between a small subset of the group and other than my own report out to the group, there was no attempt by others on the calls to link these conversations to other threads or to inform those who were not present. I posted a summary of the conversation to the wiki, emailed it to people inviting them to continue the dialogue on-line, and sent the audio file to participants, but no follow up conversation occurred even among those who were on the call. There was actually only one response early on and it was about the forum itself rather than the contents of the dialogue:

Judy: *The call was to some extent linear and in a certain sense mono-vocal (as only one person can speak at a time, limited capacity to ask questions, follow up on ideas expressed), and I found so many ideas and questions were stimulated for me that I could not possibly share, inquire into, or follow up on even a fraction of them within the constraints of the teleconference format and most of that “data” would likely be lost. Hence I suggested a concurrent “chat” thread so that those of us who wished to could jot down thoughts in relation to the conversation as they occurred. This is very much what younger generations are doing constantly today -- they manage multiple conversations concurrently with instant messaging and other media forms. How are these and might these relational and communication meaning-making trends influence the nature of our*
design for inquiry processes? Rather than limit or control, how can we harness and work with this expansive energy?

My own frustration about how to mix the two forums showed up in my field notes as well:

So, I wonder whether no one is really interested in furthering any of these [conference call] concepts. Wondering about the continuity of mixed conversation mediums. What would allow these to integrate?

A pattern for me is now apparent: I ask relevant and important questions, but only to myself in my journals. My entries reflect that I would sometimes I attempt to answer my questions, which inevitably resulted in the creation of assumptions and/or more questions.

4. Exhilarating, Energizing, Meaningful, Enriching Interaction

Interviews

Despite these problems and difficulties, participants found the collaborative learning group exhilarating, energizing, meaningful and enriching. What generated this experience was the interaction with deep thinkers, thoughtful people with great minds and different perspectives. For those people who participated in the on-going email conversations, they shared that it was a positive experience to be part of this group of reflective practitioners engaged in rich and intense dialogue that delivered flashes of insight as well as fodder for pondering design. A sense of excitement and enthusiasm was apparent in their voices, in the way they emphasized certain phrases or words (underscored for emphasis), and in the speed of their conversation when they talked about this aspect of their experience. Even Terri, who lost interest, expressed that in the beginning there were flashes of excitement and curiosity in the dialogues in which she
participated. Here are some examples of responses from a cross section of participants; as you read their words, listen for their enthusiasm:

Tom: *Exhilarating in the sense that it was wonderful to be connected to what I consider to be really inquiring, incisive minds and hearts who are doing great work in the world and to be able to have access to that flow was exhilarating!*

Sue: *At other times fully engrossing, exciting, and delicious! The collection of people was a really nice collection of people; they are folks that largely do some thinking about their practice, that are into a little bit more than technique. They are reflective practitioners, which is something that I value very much.*

For Tom, Max, Matt, and Judy their enthusiasm included a sense of synchronicity between our practice and their work. These participants were also focused on formative work outside of our practice (writing, workshop development, or developing training). For example, Tom’s round-the-world training program, which began prior to the finish of my research, was focused specifically on dialogue. Max’s workshops addressed dialogue and inquiry as a means of engaging with one another, especially as it related to conflict. They each mentioned that the conversations that were going on on-line were dovetailing into their work, and the knowledge being generated in the dialogues increased their clarity of thought as well as brought new insights. For example:

Tom: *It was great and in many ways while I was working on my own project and would go and read what people were writing, some of it, of how that synchronicity works, would go right in.*
Matt: *Nice blend of people putting out new thoughts that were well timed with my own experiential journey in what I was doing with clients.*

**Dialogues**

Exhilaration and a sense of increasing energy surfaced in the dialogues themselves. It showed up in the flurry of responses, depth of engagement, in the tone and timbre of conversation, in the intense back and forth of the dialogue, and in the richness of the information that was shared over a three to seven-day period. Sometimes people specifically commented on it:

Judy: *I was really excited by our conversation and I’m honored to be invited and included among y'all!*

Tom: *By the way, could I just say that I love this conversation.*

**Field Notes**

I commented on my observation of this theme as well as my own in my field notes:

*What incredible diversity in strengths. Very excited about the mix of folks who are present and the potential for possibility.*

[I could hear excitement and enthusiasm during the introductions, everyone was very excited about the potential that could emerge from the dialogue and use of technology.

*I awakened this morning with an insight! The mix of info regarding org. design, STS, SDi, RO, Ai, etc., have been bubbling around within and without me creating quite a fog.*
Yesterday’s call with Judy and Betty must have provided a catalyst because this morning the fog seems to have lifted. I may be understanding the complete obvious for many, but here are some of the points of clarity I have now!

Though there were a few places in my journal where I actually wrote about my excitement, for the most part my own enthusiasm showed up in entries where I was energized by insights and shifts in my own thinking or where I found myself applying these insights in my practice:

*I am noticing that my own emotional defense system is shifting. Instead of a need to defend myself, I just get like a barometer reading—giving me clues as to how open I am to feedback from others. I find I ask more quickly, invite more readily, etc., in the conversations.*

*I must make more time to write down my reflections—I have so many these days!*

*Breakthrough in exploring a conflict with my business partner!*

I too shared in the sense of synchronicity that half of the group experienced. This would only be natural since it was my research; however, I also experienced such synchronicity as it related to this work in other areas in my life, work, and relationships:

*I am finding that all my practice is dovetailing into my focus here on design and that it is calling me to look differently at what we are designing “to do”.*
How synchronistic that Scharmer’s first Presencing class is occurring right in the middle of my research and that Sam, without knowing why, sent me the information about it! It is a perfect fit and really helps me understand levelising even better.

5. Differences in Frames and Meaning Making

Interviews

Everyone, in one way or another, expressed the unexpected experience that despite our common general frame (Appreciative Inquiry) there were striking differences in understanding, approach, meaning for the language of AI, especially design, and expectations for the focus of our conversations. They also noticed that these differences pulled the conversation in a variety of different directions.

Sue: It reminded me once again that really no matter who you bring together for a conversation the fundamentals about what the meaning is of words and concepts is, in some ways it’s a block because we think we are speaking the same language but we are not speaking the same language, so it reminded me that that’s true even when you get people together who are coming from the sort of same frame work of appreciative inquiry but that really has no bearing on the content of the work that we are doing it just really talks about the overall orientation to it and once you’re into the content we’re back into trying to create shared meaning around shared ideas and concepts and how important that is because it is hard to have a dialogue without that so that reminded me of that.
Max: I was so struck by how different everybody’s frame was and how they perceived this.

Differences in our frames influenced the focus of our conversation as we sought common ground. For Terri and Sam especially, this searching was experienced as theoretical or academic dialogue about design, which was of less interest to them than conversations around practice.

Terri: I thought we would be digging into the Design and Destiny phases of the 5D cycle and exploring at a deeper level how to make those meaningful and how to make them as powerful an intervention as the Discovery and Dream phases are, and how to really use those phases of the process to sustain the energy that we create when we begin the work, but we didn’t do that. Several folks were interested in larger questions like what kind of organizational designs will really work in the world we are living in, and what kind of organizational designs on a macro level do we really want to be participating in bringing to life. I do think that organizational design and Design and Destiny are related, but I could not make the transition between the conversations that were taking place and that initial question. I wasn’t making the connection between the discussion and what I was interested in.

On the other hand, Tom, Judy, Sue, Max, and Matt found the philosophical/theoretical conversations relevant to their focus and work. Upon reflection during the interview, Judy wondered whether her passionate pursuit of the more theoretical actually de-energized people, even as it energized her. Here are samples of their comments:

Tom: I found the philosophical commentary more useful to me than the practical sort of ‘Here is what we are doing in our organization’ kind of comments. I thought those were
nice and interesting, but I think that is sort of what I see on the list serve, what the AI practitioner does. So while it was useful; it was nice; it didn’t take me in the realms of thought that I wanted to go to like the others did. So there were two, almost two different streams of conversation going.

And Sue and Max both commented on the need for a balance between the two:

Sue: You know, I’m also interested in that whole proposed psychology between applied and theoretical. I’ve never really understood how any conversation that is going to be useful can be wholly one or the other. At least for me the energy has always come from how one impacts the other; you know, if we have theory how does that influence our practice and what are we learning from our practice that would shift our theory.

Max: I’m fine with stretching my thinking, but if it seems to be really arcane or philosophical beyond where I can see any application, then I just I don’t get energy into it. But of course I recognize the importance of that stuff in pushing thinking, and I think that was what was reflected in the distribution of people. In some of the academic articles, I could understand what they were saying, and whether I agreed or not, I could see that they were making some good points but I couldn’t see my practically applying it anywhere.

Dialogues

Our awareness of the differences in our frames showed up throughout our conversations. We held a total of 15 different conversations over the eight months and the importance of
attending to frames, mental models, and diverse perspectives showed up in ten of them. This amounts to two-thirds of our conversations.

Matt: *I realized as I read your response that I had indeed made some serious assumptions in the belief that my language was the same as others relative to the terms “Design” and “Destiny.”* Clearly, I was mistaken and your clarification, as well as those of Sue and Judy, were very helpful.

As mentioned above, the need to continuously stop, reflect on those frames, and clarify our meaning took us down myriad pathways of inquiry into what Terri referred to as abstract exploration:

Judy: *I am not sure what we each mean by some of the key words in the above proposed assumption. Here are some questions that come to mind for me regarding it:*

- Can AI be "used"?
- What "is" AI?
- Do organizations have "intentions"?
- What "is" Design? What "is" Destiny?
- In what ways does framing our focus as being on Design and Destiny liberate and in what ways does it constrain our inquiry and its potential?

Field Notes

This theme of differences in framing and the need to step back and clarify was noted in my journal both as field notes about our process and practice and in comments related to my practice:
I am realizing just in the recent flurry of conversation that people come into a dialogue so much from their frame and how they listen “to do” what their frame invites.

I am truly challenged to practice this stuff in a situation where I am discovering the power of story. When someone has a story about me—and they are sticking to their story even if I tell them that’s not what’s going on—it seems impossible to go on together. There is no way to create a shared story when someone absolutely refuses to let go of the frame they have about another. And this is, of course, my story.

Our practice of exploring different frames and the impact of these frames on practice, which participants described as abstract, theoretical or academic, was the dominant focus of our conversations, regardless of the topic. It appeared to be our efforts to truly understand one another and to analyze how our frames, and mental models in general, related to organizational design, design, and destiny that guided this conversational direction. Someone would make a statement and questions would emerge in an effort to expose hidden assumptions and challenges associated with the practical application of that statement. This kept us in an analysis cycle.

Because two thirds of our conversations related to framing and meaning making, there are many examples to support their experience of this theme. Judy was the most skillful at asking questions that challenged the framing we brought to our statements. Here are a couple of examples in the form of ‘call and response’:

Sue: *What would it mean if we approached all of our work from a design perspective? In other words, what if we said we were going to design organizations and cultures through a positive lens using the design sciences?*
Judy: *Who is the "we"? Who is included and not included? To what level and extent?*

*These questions go to the heart of potential for generating shadow dynamics... linguisically and conceptually there is the ideal of the inclusive "we," but in the cases that we discuss in the shadow-AI article, some which might appear to be the most collaborative and extensive of conscious collaborative iterative design processes, we felt the enactment of AI, or perhaps repetitive imposition from some participants' perspectives, served to reify existing tacit hierarchical structures and power dynamics.*

And

Matt: *I think what you are asking is essentially related to the integration of "evolutionary, co-constructive practices" into the culture of an organization.*

Sue: *May we have your operating definition of co-construction please?*

Betty: *What if people have never heard of “co-constructing” -- is it ok for to assume that we are “collectively” organizing?*

Judy: *This feels so slippery... Betty, your question made me for the first time reflect upon the machine-like imagery embedded in the term "co-construction" - sounds concrete when the reality is so amorphous, and ongoing and ubiquitous, as Cheri essentially notes.*

*And what do we mean by evolve? I think a key question here relates to temporal rhythms.... How much/often and to what extent do we want to be "working together to discover/generate new knowledge and new ways of going on together"?*
In my field notes I commented on how these questions clarified thinking and raised important questions, and how they also changed the dialogue and our engagement with one another. For example:

*Judy is clearly interested in critical theory, the shadow, and power issues. Her questions are great ones, but they STOP the dialogue almost before it even gets started. We get to see that we are making assumptions in our statements. But what of the assumptions in her questions? Very easy to go off and running down a side alley and away from where some people might want to go.*

Much later in my journal I made note that this whole concept of framing needed to be part of the reflective practice conversation. I realized that knowing and disclosing one’s frame needed to be part of dialogical practice, and that when someone’s frame was not transparent, people needed to engage in a form of reflective practice that helped make those frames visible:

*This whole concept of recognizing the importance of frames, allowing people to have them but uncovering them must be an essential practice in SBOs. It’s way too central to our whole engagement here to not have relevance for design!*

6. Experiences Related to Collaborative Learning

*Interviews*

This final theme was a challenge. At first in my analysis, I had more than one category; their descriptions related to dialogue, reflective practice, and collaboration. As I read and reread the interviews, however, their experiences actually reflected the elements of collaboratively learning. I did not mention collaborative learning in my interview question, nor reference the
elements of collaborative learning, however, I was delighted to realize that every participant expressed, in one way or another, their experience of one or more of the elements of collaborative learning. Max, Sam, Betty, and Matt expressed participating in real collaboration with each person contributing their own knowledge in the exploration of a new way of going on. Judy, Sue, Max, Tom, and Matt all discussed our reflective practice with Judy and Sue specifically noting the impact of frame on action and its relationship to social constructionism (cycles of action and reflection). Judy, Max, Betty, Sam, and Matt commented on our capacity for dialogue and the importance of dialogical space. Everyone mentioned the relevance of our different frames (multiple ways of knowing), and Judy, Tom, Betty, and Matt talked of the challenge to stay focused and find a way to generate new knowledge (a focus on X) (Peters & Armstrong, 1998a).

Matt: *So I think the knowledge that came out of that for me, I guess, was no one person can be an expert on much of anything. We are a community of experts, depending on one another; or we’re a community of learners is perhaps a better way of looking at it, depending on one another. I think in some respect I think the experience has left me a little less awe struck by perhaps people who are better known not only because of that but because of the down to earth nature of all the people I was engaged in conversation with. The bottom line was you had a bunch of people willing to put their knowledge into a hopper, turn it up with other people’s knowledge and have something new come out, rather than say, “Okay, here is 40 years of research I have done on the subject so it must be right.” Instead, it was, “Here’s some stuff I am hearing from this person or that person, whatever and here’s some stuff that comes out of it that’s new for me.” And so it*
was really the building on one another, and I wanted to make sure I included that the idea that people who are working collaboratively build on one another’s knowledge and are willing as a group to tear down their old understandings when new information becomes available that challenges their old view.

Matt expressed the experience of feeling like an equal player—even among those whom he previously considered to be experts—recognizing the value of his perspective and contribution to the whole. Max, Matt, Tom, Sam, and Judy experienced the benefits of multiple frames of reference as they contributed to developing personal clarity in their own understanding as well as insight into new ways of understanding.

Max: *It was just cool because what we would end up either in email or on calls was that at different points in time people agreed with different people. It wasn’t like you had two people constantly agreeing with each other. I would agree with one person on one point and another person on another point and heavily respected our differences. No one had to come and say I’m right, you’re wrong kind of thing, that wasn’t what we were striving for, it was just an interesting way of looking at it and thinking about it, and oh, I understand that, I personally don’t agree with that, and I wouldn’t go that direction, but I see where you are going and that makes sense.*

Max, Sue, Judy, Tom, Terri, Matt, and Betty all commented on the value of reflective practice, specifically the opportunity to reflect on their own frame, and see how it may be contributing to their thinking and actions. Sue noted how important reflective practice is and how difficult it is to work it into day-to-day practice:
Sue: So there was a real need that this conversation was fulfilling for me and it was that need to be more reflective and to move away from, “Hey does anybody have a protocol on ______, you know?” I’m struck by my desire to have more of these conversations amongst my own colleagues and the difficulty that exists in trying to find the place and time and energy to have them, particularly in the press of more operational activities.

Dialogues

Judy, Terri, Tom, and Max all recalled that early on the focus of our dialogues was all over the place, but then it gradually narrowed (to focus on X), leading to rich conversations that were generative.

Judy: [This experience] linked for me co-construction in language with kind of, even the language of design is largely shaped around, based around building, construction even social construction. Yeah so, that kind of linkage of sort of organizational structures that we tend to envision in organizational science as being function and departments and processes and all those kinds of conceptual things, and then bringing that down to, linking that explicitly to the level of social construction and language and how language itself is a design process, even when its not consciously approached that way, but it becomes more valuable when we approach it that way.

Matt: This was a real collaboration. Collaboration is really something that occurs when there is minimal leadership in terms of direction and where the participants are willing contributors who have interest in the subject matter that really transcends the interests of
any one particular party. I think that it is also something where people have the opportunity to contribute at levels they feel comfortable with and that they are able to address areas that are both troublesome and do that in a safe and respectful environment as well as investigating the black hole kind questions, the ones that perhaps have not been explored too much and people willingly leap into them hopefully with a safety line attached and go willingly into un-chartered territory in large part because of the trust they feel for the people they are leaping into the hole with.

In addition, Betty, Matt, Max, and Sam commented on the importance of safety, trust, and respect as it pertained to keeping the dialogical space open. Max and Matt specifically mentioned that as AI practitioners, we are wont to walk our talk, so this should be expected.

Betty: *Our culture was very respectful; the culture was very open and you could say anything you wanted to say and it was a very safe environment?*

Judy: *I think we did a pretty good job collectively in terms of inquiring into that when there was something or actually saying well this is how I see it. So, there was a pretty good balance as far as that goes.*

Sam: *You allowed for a lot of openness in the conversations and moving where the people went with the conversation, kept clarifying and checking assumptions and where it was necessary helping to creating a sense of shared meaning with clarity.*

Along these lines, Matt experienced the group developing a sense of trust and safety early on by struggling to find a communication forum that worked for everyone. As mentioned above, trust and safety are important in keeping dialogue open. Establishing them early on is essential.
for inclusion and full voice. Without full voice, those who are excluded from the dialogue limit the possibilities for what might be generated.

Matt: [We created safety] at the outset by struggling to find the best way to communicate with one another, you know should we be doing it through a blog? Should we be doing it email? Should we be doing it through telephone conversations? Hearing what everybody had to say on that subject and adapting and trying to make things work for everyone.

It was interesting to note that those who did not find a virtual forum that worked well for them did not sustain a voice within the group. Neither Sam nor Terri, neither of whom ever gained comfort with any of the virtual options, voiced their dissatisfaction with the theoretical direction of the conversation. The trust that Matt refers to does not appear to include Terri who shared:

Terri: Well, I will tell you the absolute honest answer to that, and I would not have thought of that if you had not asked it just now. I think I didn’t bring it up because I think it was a self-esteem thing. I think I felt that my curiosity was less significant.

Our dialogues contained many references to the importance of each of these collaborative learning elements for Strength-based organizational design. In fact, their description of their own experience in our practice was very much a mirror for what was discussed as vital to the way of being and organizing for SBOs:

Judy: I've increasingly come to feel that "reflexive" needs to be integral to "inquiry" for our AI conversation, and when it is not, we run the risk of implementing a process design rather than engaging in authentic inquiry.
Max: *In that spirit, the JABS articles that resonated most strongly with me were those that focused on the values of design research and practice, most notably collaboration with clients/users, a pragmatic/solution orientation, working in a larger (systemic) context, and prototyping to foster creative improvement.*

**Changes in Understanding and Facilitating**

This phenomenological inquiry was followed by two additional interview questions about the nature of participants’ understanding and facilitation of *design* and *destiny* during and subsequent to their engagement in our collaborative learning process. The first of these questions was: *How, if at all, has your understanding of Design and Destiny changed and what, if anything, did our praxis have to do with this?* This question relates to my research question #2.

**Research Question #2:** How, if at all, will the iterative practice of levelising in our on-line collaborative learning group relate to our understanding of the design and destiny process of the AI 5D cycle?

Participants who actively engaged in the process—Sue, Max, Judy, Matt, and Betty—all indicated that during the time of our engagement their thinking about *design* and *destiny* had shifted to one degree or another. Tom, who was passively engaged, reported noteworthy changes in his thinking and understanding as well:

Tom: *The level of talk about design, about Strength-based organizations, about OD, about where the shadow comes in was really useful to me in framing my work and in formulating or articulating some of the things that kind of float around my head that I*
haven’t been able to quite ground, so the fact that other people were grounding them for me was very useful.

Even those who disengaged—Terri and Sam—indicated that their thinking had been stimulated and that they received a new idea or reminders that would influence their future actions:

Terri: It is clear to me that what it did was reinforce the fact that I should be thinking about the 5D cycle in the larger question about systems and structures and processes that need to be in place, long term.

Sam: All of the design articles were very helpful and meaningful in terms of thinking more and more about how to design engagements, which is something that I was not thinking about but I did take that to a whole new level.

The changes in understanding or thinking reported by participants fell broadly into three categories. These categories reflect the focus of the themes that emerged in participants’ comments:

1. Rethinking AI and the design/destiny phases in the 5D cycle.
2. Rethinking how we engage people in organizations.
3. Practices and issues relevant to design.

1. Rethinking AI and Design/Destiny

More than half of the participants reported a shift in their understanding of the relationship between AI, the 5D cycle, and design and destiny. One of the attractions of engaging
in this dialogue for most participants was a general lack of real clarity on how to describe or implement design and destiny, and for Tom, Matt, Betty, and Sue our practice brought greater clarity in this area. It also raised questions about how practical the 5D process was for an organization truly interested in developing its SBO capacity.

Tom: *It’s really thrown my thinking around Design into a deeper place and made me very dissatisfied with thinking about Strength-Based Organizations and the 5D’s and sort of AI as it is currently practiced as an effective application. Except in a summit where I think going through the 5D’s is a very satisfying activity for clients, I am just not convinced the Design part actually works well in summits.*

Matt: *So the complexity is certainly a major piece for me and I think perhaps I had too simplistic a view and it has changed my views in that regard quite a bit; the immense knowledge that came out of this group of people.*

Their comments reflecting this showed up in the dialogues as well:

Judy: *In a sense the strongly held image of the Ds helped de-skill me. In a certain sense, as I had been trained to "work to support our clients in the best ways we can" rather than to try to implement an image of a process in the ideal.*

Matt: *I also think you are right on the mark when you say that people view the 4-D cycle (a concrete concept) linearly and, paradoxically, I think that in large part, that may be due to the reliance of individuals, groups, teams and organizations on the 4-D model*
rather than concentrating on the philosophy and “way of being” (an abstract concept) that is at the core of AI.

Notes from my journal indicate that I was beginning to question the framing for thinking about design:

*What if, because we are not conscious, our actions result in a design for our families and communities that spells death and demise? What if our purpose and decision-making points are focused on the wrong end-goal; what if focus is absolutely essential? Then we should be designing around health & wellness, around achieving consciousness on the plant, on maximizing opportunity for synergy.*

In my journal there are also regular reflections where I seem to be shifting my own appreciation and understanding of AI, the 5D cycle, and how they relate to SBOs:

*From an SDi perspective I think AI is definitely second tier. It’s somehow making room for all these different perspectives, values, and ways of knowing to be able to contribute to a common goal. SBOs must be designed so that all these different frames have a place. AI is definitely second tier and I think folks using AI from a first tier frame turn AI into an “it”, a method. This is what the issue with the 5D cycle is.*

*It is clear to me that summits following the 5D process don’t come close to helping an organization develop a new storyline or become an SBO. And the 5Ds don’t either; they only seem to encourage designing in ways that fit the old paradigm or maybe the only way to use 5D effectively is if you are standing in the new paradigm. I think the focus on and emphasis on the 5D cycle has totally distracted people; taken them down the wrong*
road. Instead of focusing on storyline and the principles, people have focused on “doing” the 5Ds in linear fashion...one time!

2. Rethinking how we engage people

Most of our dialogues, in one way or another, focused on people, relationships, language, and engagement as they relate to design. These conversations had an impact on several participants’ thoughts about how we as consultants can and should engage people in an organization. This included how to design engagements in general as well as their interactions with the clients. They mentioned their heightened awareness for being truly open and honest in conversations with the client: aware of their own frames and open to others. These concepts seemed to be central to our own work as consultants as well as to the interaction between members of an organization or community, in general. Participants expressed their experience in these ways:

Max: I think the best thing we can do is we can design our brains to be more receptive to other people and to improve our ability to interact with people to figure out the path to move forward and also the whole emotional intelligence thing; to interact with them in a way that keeps us moving forward, even if that is a meandering path per the chaordic model. I would say that this project really raised my awareness and probably motivated me to try harder on, and it also relates to the work I’m doing any time I meet with clients, to really listen to what they’re saying, and then respect that. To see where [they are]and then think, ok how would look at it to really try to see where is the win-win. Well what I am trying to say is I need to ask more questions than I’m doing, I feel like I’m asking a
bunch of questions and I am hearing something and I start to think, “Okay, I know where this person is coming from;” and I may be doing that prematurely.

Sue: I am very interested in the shadow, partly because it’s controversial. I don’t know how it relates to design yet. I don’t have a direct connection to the issue of design other than sort of generically the whole question about: as we engage people in design, what implicit or hidden assumptions are at play which may or may not be helpful?

Matt: I guess that’s it for me, I guess the collaboration, I just find that so foundational and it really is to me the necessary ingredient, if you will, of collaborative practice, is that ability to build on one another’s thoughts and thinking and understand that while we’re heading in a broad direction we might all come up with different roads to get there and its not wrong or right; it just is.

These interview results were similar to the contents of our conversations on-line and in our teleconference. For example:

Max: A few thoughts: 1) provide opportunities for everyone to participate in the design process in ways that are most meaningful to them (e.g., both large-group and small-group interactions, oral discussion and written quiet storming, metaphors, etc.) and respect that, for some, that may mean varying levels of participation and possibly only during certain stages. For example, per the MBTI model, extroverts may want to participate more than introverts, intuitives more in the beginning (big picture) and sensors more at the end (details).
Judy: I have two thoughts: (1) It may not be about changing behavior, per se, but about designing so that existing behaviors are re-aligned and directed, and/or that desired behaviors are reinforced via recognition, rewards, resources, etc.

Sue: Having leadership that truly understands and is committed is so important. So, I wonder if we might be better off focusing our own inquiry into understanding the worlds of those leaders and developing our own repertoire of ways of first engaging with them and then supporting them to engage their members?

3. Practices and Issues Relevant to Design

The third area where understanding and thinking changed for participants was in the area of practices relevant to design. Participants talked about realizing the impact of mindset, perspective, ways of engaging with one another, and organizational learning. Sue and Judy mentioned that there is always the challenge of differences in frames, even when we are speaking the same language, and that these frames can block the potential of the organization as a whole (as well as for some members) unless acknowledged and embraced. They noted that dialogue and reflective practice were necessary to expose the multiple ways of knowing that were present in an organization. They also commented on the practice of prototyping and iterative cycles of action and reflection that were necessary for learning, innovation, and evolving in the organization.

Sue: It reminded me once again that really no matter who you bring together for a conversation, the fundamentals about what the meaning is of words and concepts is, in
some way, it’s a block because we think we are speaking the same language but we are not speaking the same language.

Betty, Tom, Judy, Max, and Sue noted the critical nature of dialogue and iterative reflective practice in surfacing these differences in order to move towards a desired shared future.

Betty: Changed my thinking about how important Design is to keep the momentum moving in the intervention, whatever it is you’re doing that will allow Destiny, for it to be embedded into the culture as a way of doing business. There is not a specific process for you to worry about, but we have to make sure there is a dialogue and all the people are in the dialogue that can make it happen. It’s not so much about doing these 8 steps like Kotter’s Eight Steps to lead change. I don’t think that’s as important as it is about the dynamics and the dialogue; that you allow time for the dialogue to emerge.

Judy: And there was a lot of dialogue in the beginning around this reflective practice, incorporating a reflective practice into AI practice and scholarship and you know, I am all for that. I think that is critical to any organizational development work and practice, and in my work around the shadow that is one of the things, missed things can lead us to unwittingly employ Appreciative Inquiry as a management tool, and that can become aligned with agendas of the power holders of the organization; that the may wind up using AI to as a mechanism to reify the structure rather than liberate the energy.
For Matt, Sam, and Max, the concept of prototyping (Coughlan, Suri, & Canales, 2007), introduced by Sue, was a significant reframing for organizational planning offering a means for learning and a more generative approach towards engagement and innovation.

Sam: *The thing I think I learned in this forum, and also from you outside of this forum, was the value of prototyping, and I think even in Design to be thinking about prototyping as part of the Design.*

Max: *The biggest thing I walked away with that I had not thought of before was even the word prototyping. We have historically used piloting and yet my sense is that pilot connotes not only visions of an airplane or something, but that this is something inevitable and is just sort of being beta tested. A prototype says: “We are truly embracing the concept of continuous learning, we are throwing something out there and it is your response that is going to form the next iteration of it.”*

Judy actually experienced new understanding during our last conversation; she came to know social constructionism *in her bones*. This new knowing or level of awareness around the nature of social constructionism emerged for her in the midst of our on-line dialogue about design:

Judy: *The booby prize for me was, it can be expressed very simply as: rediscovering the essence of social construction, which is first we co-construct our conversations and then they construct us, then they design us. First we design them and then they design us. And that’s so, almost on its face so, obvious, and yet I think we, I forget that, you know. And it was really great to get into these conversations about Design and its relation to*
Appreciative Inquiry; and Design as a disembodied sort of concept. But what does that mean and how do I relate to that as a scholar practitioner and so on? That kind of the inquiry felt, that deeply reflective aspect of this inquiry for me is what led to that insight, not as a textbook concept, but in my bones. Oh yes, here it is; we are doing this and I can feel it and experience this.

What I notice about these concepts or practices, which participants describe as important in organizational design, is that they reflect the elements of collaborative learning. These same concepts appear throughout our dialogues. Some of these comments are noted above, under theme #5. Here are a few additional references:

Betty: *I think it takes a great awareness of time and dialogue to build generative conversations that really need to be “woven” into the existing fabric of the organization.*

Sam: *It’s about creating the conditions for dialogue, flow of loving energy. It’s not about getting along; people need to be able to take a stand and feel comfortable even taking “fierce and courageous” positions.*

And there were some precautionary comments related to reflection and action, reminding us that there needed to be some way of assessing when, where and how such practices should occur:

Judy: *How much/often and to what extent do we want to be “working together to discover/generate new knowledge and new ways of going on together”? Probably contextually dependent - on industry, level within the organization, nature of the function - e.g. R&D, marketing, vs. accounting. Inventing “new knowledge” may get accounting,*
and the organization, into trouble - especially if the co-construction is outside the bounds of legality and/or ethical practice :-) 

My field notes contain a number of references that represent changes in my own understanding and thinking with regards to the people side of design. They reflect new insight into my own capacity for practicing collaborative learning. Below are samples of some of the notes from my journal. There are many excerpts that address reflective practice and the impact of iterative cycles of action and reflection:

If the idea is to be mindful in the moment, then it seems the ego must dissolve or at least all attachments to “my story”, my perception, my idea. In letting go of those things, fear falls away; no need to protect anything. It is hard to stay here—it’s like the world calls me back.

Whenever I want to speak and I feel fear or defense welling up, I shall remember to come back to the moment, to be mindful of my emotional response and to detach from experiencing my self—with a little ’s’. Instead I need to love the other and expand and connect to that person’s positive core because at the core I don’t believe we are ever trying to annihilate the other.

When I stay in a mindset of looking for what can emerge, listening for everything that is going on, I seem to be more open. Suddenly even the spider webs on my porch are a part of it. Seeing them as metaphors—giving them multiple meanings—I can learn from them to clear the cobwebs from my own thinking and feeling every morning! When I look for
multiple meanings in everything, my world opens up! Yeah for spiders. From irritation
to gratitude, just a shift in meaning coming from opening and not attaching to my frame.
The trick seems to be to detach from past or future frames and just be present—Tolle’s
frame, Scharmer’s open mind, open heart, open will!

At one point in my journal it was clear that I suddenly had a breakthrough in my appreciation for
the complexity of multiple ways of knowing, seeing the layers both within and without:

I think I finally really understand hermeneutics!! Our frames are not just a cultural
perspective but grounded in our own inner history as well. How we understand the
meaning of words—past experience, personal expectations, personal stories about what
is and what’s possible, even personality or learning style! I know I read all of this and
understood it, but there is again something different in this way of understanding. It’s like
suddenly I REALLY SEE experientially what it means. This kind of understanding, I think,
will impact how I look to facilitate or consult—I will see, hear, and understand people
differently, knowing I need to know more if I am to understand them I will automatically
ask back.

Spiral Dynamics [SDi] helps explain multiple frames and perspectives, culture, values all
that stuff. I still don’t see how this all relates yet, but it seems like it’s a fit in some way.
Not sure how AI meshes with it yet I really feel like it does somehow.
Although there were not a lot of references to a focus on the construction of new knowledge, I commented on the challenge of finding and holding a focus early on. In addition, I noted our tendency to focus on the personal in our dialogues:

*We are all over the place in our conversation. I keep trying to tie threads together and offer a focus, but it’s not working. Maybe I’m missing something.*

*S somehow we have to shift our focus from the personal to the transpersonal. We’ve got to start seeing from the framed, contextualized perspective. I see how the integral worldview is a definite fit here. Need to learn more about the integral part of SDi.*

And there are many notes in my journal about the importance of dialogue and the need to develop our capacity to dialogue:

*Tolle talks about attaching to the pain body; I wonder if this is the same as simply attaching identity to mind/body/spirit—attaching our sense of being to a fixed noun, an ‘it’. This seems to get in the way of dialogue. If we instead don’t attach to any thing but instead see ourselves as being-in-connection, a verb, then it is easier to make room for everything needed for dialogue—easier to include, easier to suspend, easier to respect and be present and open.*

*Ah, light bulbs; this is where AI comes in! Because AI is focused on positive, generative sense making, because it looks to find value in every situation and person, it invites dialogue. It’s focus on inquiry supports an attitude of inquiry! AI is how a group that is*
transpersonal engages in conversation—fear is eliminated making room for real
dialogue and reflection.

Towards the end, my journal entries reflect that I was experiencing a shift in my
perception and understanding regarding my role as a consultant as well as the nature of the
challenge associated with design and destiny. My field notes suggest that the change in my
understanding is paradigmatic. I no longer see transformational change as the relevant or
appropriate focus. Though my awareness that the culture emerges from the story was present at
the outset of my research, I, once again, seem to understand it in a new way:

When I think about what’s important, I’m using the same words that have been written in
many of the AI books and articles, words I even used in my proposal, and yet, there is
something different about the way I now understand them. It makes me wonder how often
we use the same terminology and thematic references in our conversations with no
awareness that we don’t share the same understanding.

What stands out for me now is the absolute importance of understanding one another’s
worldview, and how integral language and inquiry are to understanding and
misunderstanding. It’s not a transformation, no one needs to change anything; everyone
needs to be included just where they are. We just need a new story about organizing! A
story that results in leadership and management operating with a worldview that
organizations are organic, transpersonal, integral, emergent entities that continuously
evolve from the inside. This is definitely Yellow vMeme! [And SDi reference]
Taking ideas from an integrative worldview and trying to understand them in a positivist frame is impossible, but that’s what was happening, I think.

The final question for each participant was: How, if at all, has your facilitation of Design and Destiny changed and what, if anything, did our praxis have to do with this? This question relates to my research question 3.

Research Question #3: How, if at all, will the iterative practice of levelising in our on-line collaborative learning group relate to our facilitation of the design and destiny process of the AI 5D cycle?

Everyone, except Terri and Sam, indicated that the way in which they will facilitate design and destiny in the future has been influenced by our conversations together, and yet most of participants were not sure just how, as they had not had an opportunity to implement those changes:

Tom: Definitely changed it, but I don’t know how yet because I haven’t done it; I am doing two summits this summer and I will probably know more then. Yeah, I am not really sure how yet, but I know that it has changed it.

Matt: I guess what I have been doing is taking some of practices or ideas that people have shared on how to, in particular, transfer the energy from the Dream phase into Destiny. That’s where I find that I need to pay the most attention as a facilitator. So there were some ideas that came up from everyone, good ideas relative to how to instill that
kind of motivation. I think what they are right now though is a series of ideas and we
don’t really have a form to them and I think that is the next step, the next step is how to
find a way to incorporate these ideas about how to turn these provocative propositions
and action plans into everyday work.

Judy: (This experience) feels to me like an image that will influence, absolutely influence
things, and it’s improvisational as to how it will influence things. It may influence things
in ways that are not even conscious.

The shift for Terri was not so much a new insight or new knowledge gained from the
collaboration, but rather a remembering of important concepts or actions that she wanted to be
doing in her work with clients:

Terri: It reinforced for me that, for example, the Design and Destiny work we do at a
summit has to be anchored into something much bigger in order for it to have traction.
It’s not that I didn’t know that . . . it’s simply reinforced that, what do we call it, the
“drive by AI” doesn’t work very well in part because it’s not anchored. So it has not
changed my practice yet, but it may.

For participants who teach Appreciative Inquiry to others, our practice influenced or
raised questions for them about the content of their classes and workshops:

Betty: So I have found the way I describe Appreciative Inquiry has changed, and I can
also tell you that I have been very clear about the time your research started and where I
began to see AI as a philosophy or an approach and the 5D cycle as a method to engage
the whole system into the dialogue.
Sue: I just finished teaching a graduate course in AI and I was just thinking of, I would love to teach this course without ever referring to the 5D model. I would like to and I will seek opportunities to experiment more with talking about this stuff without the 4 or 5 D’s.

Only Terri and Sam felt that there was no real change in their understanding and facilitation of Design and Destiny:

Terri: [My understanding and facilitation] haven’t changed, but what it has done is raised some questions about what I need to think through further. It did provide me with a bunch of articles that at some point I am going to plow through to see how that can inform my original question.

Sam: I think you get out of things what you put into it and at some point I wasn’t as engaged in the forum, so I am sure what I got out of the experience was directly proportional to what I put into it and I know that I didn’t engage with the long email conversations back and forth like some of the others did, because if I had I think I would have gotten more out of it.

It is also these same two individuals that shared significant frustration and incompatibility with the asynchronous, on-line forum, so much so that they ceased to participate in the conversations.

Terri: And doing so much by email cluttered my mind and it made me want to turn my computer off. I hated that part; and I would see your email tracks when there was an thread going and I would see 8 messages pop up in my email box and I would relate to
the conversations the way I sometimes relate to the AI list serve, and I would think, “Oh my god, let me hit the delete button.” It just didn’t work well for me.

Sam: I found long conversations via email were less engaging for me I would much rather think out loud than engage in that type of conversation via email.

In addition, both participants found that their personal and professional interests did not align with the direction of the conversation:

Terri: Well, I thought we would be digging into the Design and Destiny phases of the 5D cycle and exploring at a deeper level how to make those meaningful and how to make them as powerful an intervention as the Discovery and Dream phases are, and how to really use those phases of the process to sustain the energy that we create when we begin the work. That was my understanding of what we were doing. I realized as we got into the guts of it that several folks were interested in larger questions, like what kind of organizational designs will really work in the world we are living in and what kind of organizational designs on a macro level do we really want to be participating in bringing to life. And maybe they are intertwined, but I felt as though they diverged at some point in the discussions, and I had less bandwidth for those discussions than I did for the micro discussions.

Sam: When we were talking about “way of being” stuff, [it was] more relevant. I can’t remember the exact conversation, but I found that very stimulating and productive.
Since so much of our conversation was focused on meaning making and understanding the ‘what’ of design our on-line dialogues contain very few references to the ‘how’ of facilitating design. Max, an internal organizational consultant, shared examples of how he had been facilitating prior to our practice early on in our dialogues. Although he indicated in his interview that he made changes in his training and to some of his approaches during our practice together, examples of those changes were never discussed in our on-line conversations. Perhaps this is because the changes he made occurred after he was no longer participating in the conversations due to workload. Terri did make reference to something she was going to do as a result of our conversations:

Terri: *I'm thinking, this is a great opportunity for me to relook at my contracting, or perhaps at "next steps" with this particular client, if they decide that they're really gung-ho about this process and way of working.*

My field notes indicate that I too knew that my facilitation would change but I was not sure how.

*So now what, how to facilitate the new story? Perhaps the only way is to use the power of story with leadership and management to help them fully appreciate how important story is to how we live our lives and create our organizations. With this awareness, then maybe they could look at their current stories and see differently.*

The questions I was asking at the end are distinctly different from the ones I started out with:

*At the very heart of organizational design seems to be the story that everyone shares about what it means to organize. Having a shared story that reflects the organic, transpersonal, and integral nature of the “new” organization seems essential and yet I*
don’t see how you get everyone there. Perhaps it only takes a significant number of leaders. Wasn’t it Bucky Fuller who said it only takes 5% to turn 20% and once 20% are committed, the ship will turn?

Prototyping as a way of doing business seems to be an emergent property of a transpersonal, integral paradigm. Actually, dialogue and reflective practice do as well. If this is true, then it’s really important to focus on shifting the story. What if all the things we’ve been trying to facilitate are emergent behaviors and all we really need to do is teach storytelling!

Framing, it keeps coming back to framing. And somehow, it has to be about allowing everyone to be ok just where they are, with whatever frame they have, and contributing from their perspective rather than making everyone have the same frame. How does this fit with changing the story? It’s not the individual storyline, it’s the organization’s storyline. So, if we are not about making people change then we have to have a way for everyone’s story to fit with the SBOs story…or that person needs to leave? Does this mean it is all up to leadership? Too many questions and no answers.

And true to form, I leave my questions sitting in my journal.

Summary

The data clearly support my practical theory that a collaborative learning practice using levelising would not only change understanding and thinking about AI, design and destiny, but
also increase alignment between my beliefs and my practice. There are a number of insights
and learnings that emerged in our conversations that are directly relevant to the stimulus for this
research that call for further reflection. This information, along with insights gleaned from the
data analysis, is discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Six

Discussion of Results

At the outset I wanted to better understand how to engage with clients so that through our shared actions they would develop the capacity to work differently. Specifically, I wanted to help them begin to recognize and make appropriate structural changes in how they organize (design) and then become fully empowered to continue their own on-going transformational evolution (destiny) into becoming a successful SBO. I thought that my capacity to think through the how of my question was impeded by my own frame of reference and that engaging with fellow AI practitioners in collaborative learning might provide the means for advancing my thinking so that I could better serve my clients. My practical theory included the following suppositions:

1. I needed to learn to act in congruence with my post-modern ontology.

2. I needed to practice the art of stepping back and reflecting on my own mental models about my practice and my relationship with my clients as well as AI, EL, and how they were relevant to my practice until it became almost habitual.

3. This iterative reflective practice would allow me to explore different theories or frames that might help organizations experience their co-constructive, emergent nature.

4. A group of people engaged in levelising would enable participants to look at their practice from various points of view, including a participant-observer perspective (e.g., seeing their actions as influenced by their frame of reference, which holds the promise of insight and possibility).
5. These new perspectives would provide an opportunity for a shift in understanding, which might allow the emergence of innovative ways to approach my goals (or at the very least, understand why my present actions are not effective).

These suppositions lead to my research questions and procedures. In this chapter I will revisit this theory and my research questions in light of my findings. My research questions were:

1. What will be the nature of our experience of using levelising in an on-line collaborative learning practice with a focus on the design and destiny of organizing?

2. How, if at all, will the iterative practice of levelising in our on-line collaborative learning group relate to our understanding of the design and destiny process of the AI 5D cycle?

3. How, if at all, will the iterative practice of levelising in our on-line collaborative learning group relate to our facilitation of the design and destiny process of the AI 5D cycle?

**Research Question #1: What was the Nature of Our Experience?**

*Group Dynamics*

To begin with, a number of experiential themes seem to reflect a process of group dynamics first described by Tuckman in 1965, often referred to as forming, storming, norming and performing. The themes that specifically related to the first three phases of group dynamics were Forums for Dialogue, Participation, and a Chaotic, Frustrating, Challenging and Overwhelming process. These experiences dominated the early months of our practice. These
three themes are directly related to group dynamics as they deal with how the group functions and communicates, who is included and has the opportunity to be fully involved, what level of commitment participants have, and who takes the lead in directing the focus. Since collaborative learning entails dialogue, the formation of healthy and positive group dynamics up front is essential. My findings offer insight into options for generating a healthy dialogical field.

*The Excitement Quickly Breaks Down*

During the first month, participants expressed their excitement and enthusiasm about using new technology and coming together to be in conversation with reflective practitioners on a challenging topic. Everyone was eager to get started and learn how our on-line forum would work.

Within a month, however, this dynamic changed as we tried to find a conversational forum that would work for everyone. An unspoken struggle also went on as the group moved back and forth between the practical and theoretical. With three of the less engaged participants more interested in the former, the focus of our conversations leaned toward the theoretical or academic. Over time, about two months, a way of going forward unfolded, leaving us with email as the primary conversational forum. Without fully appreciating the impact of how these decisions came about, we were not aware that the resulting combination (focus and forum) meant two of our members would eventually leave the group.
Reflections on the Dynamics

In retrospect, I think that at least part of the struggle that occurred for our group was because I had not selected a dialogical forum that served the needs of every member of the group. In addition, I did not provide sufficiently clear and concise instructions to make these forums user friendly for everyone. Conferencing websites were just beginning to develop and those that I had identified did not host asynchronous dialogue and they had a fee for use. These forums would have provided richer interaction for our teleconference calls, allowing for instant messaging and real time document sharing, but we would have faced the same scheduling challenge in synchronizing nine people’s schedules for calls. My original intention was to engage in a primarily asynchronous, on-line dialogue so that people could participate in their own time. What would have been ideal would have been a collaboration website that allowed for recorded teleconferencing, instant messaging, and asynchronous dialogue, at no charge. Since the initiation of my research one such resource has become available: http://vyew.com.

Participation

Actual participation in our on-line dialogues is an important theme to discuss, as it could inform the planning for future groups such as this. Participants identified several factors that they thought might be related to their level of participation: personality and learning style, time, and relative importance of the topic. A number of participants suggested that verbal, face-to-face interaction was more compatible with extroverted thinkers and the on-line asynchronous dialogue more congruent with introverted thinkers. The fact that both self-labeled extroverts and
introverts participated fully in the dialogues, however, indicates that there is more to participation than simply personality and learning style.

Participants expressed distinct differences in their preferred communication and learning styles; their quotes can be found in the last chapter primarily in the section on Forums for Dialogue. There were those who indicated they thought best within the context of conversation, where they actually could speak their thinking process aloud. They were not comfortable, however, committing this stream of consciousness to writing where it could have an unwarranted permanency; this concern restricted their participation. This leads me to ask a couple of questions. Is this actually a trust issue rather than a personality or style issue? Is it an Internet comfort level issue? Are those who often communicate via the Internet more accustomed to a less formal on-line written communication style?

Others were quite comfortable writing emails in the same way that they would think out loud in a conversation, which sometimes led to long missives that were discouraging to some participants because of their unwieldy length. This leads me to ask still more questions. What encouraged some participants to take the time to read through these emails and respond? In such dialogues, should there be some pre-established structure or etiquette asking members to think through and edit their thoughts in order to honor their colleagues’ time or should those who write lengthy emails be asked to create highlights for those who want to determine their interest level? Answers to these questions might inform changes in the way a researcher or facilitator would work with participants, especially at the outset. Such changes could improve the staying ability for those who are less passionate about the topic or less enamored with the forum.
Time and relative importance of participation weighed heavily on everyone’s decision to keep up with and participate fully in the dialogues. Those who were either not interested in the focus of the conversation or distracted by more pressing concerns elsewhere did not contribute, regardless of their comments about their learning style or personality type. Others, who were very interested in the focus, pushed through the challenges even though the forum did not match their preference. This indicates that for collaborative learning to be effective, the focus needs to be of sufficient relevance to each member of the group.

The findings seem to suggest that groups that want full participation throughout a practice such as this should attend more explicitly to conversations related to group dynamics in the beginning. Discovering one another’s frames, reasons for being present, and what would make the conversation highly relevant for each person would be beneficial. Making this one of the initial conversations would help set the stage for fuller participation. Such a conversation could provide an opportunity to introduce levelising experientially. Presumably, differences would surface during the group’s conversation. The participants could then be invited to explore their differences by levelising: coming to recognize their own frame and how it is influencing their position, seeing other frames, and then, as a group, developing ways to go forward that make room for everyone to engage or explicitly express their disinterest and departure. At the outset, it might have been helpful for us to discover the conditions that would have supported peak involvement for each person, or at the very least to have identified what each person needed in order to stay in the conversation.
Missed Opportunities

At any point in our research together, we could have stopped and engaged in levelising around participation or process. There were missed opportunities to revisit the group dynamics each time one of us thought about the missing participants. At any point we could have shifted to a process dialogue in an effort to bring others back into the conversation. One of my first questions to my journal, which I noted in my findings, was related to participation; I questioned why Terri was not contributing. I even surmised why, but I did not think to ask in our dialogue. In the interviews, others indicated that they too noticed people were not participating in the conversations, but none of them asked into the group. Every time I observed something that raised questions, I noted it in my journal. Not thinking to raise these questions with the group was a missed opportunity to learn, a lost chance to become aware of others and their frames. At any point in our engagement we might have reset our norms of inclusion or made explicit their disinterest had we asked into the absence of missing participants. In addition, reflecting on these unasked questions helped to surface my own frame along with the regularity of assumptions associated with that frame.

This is directly related to working with clients at every stage of engagement. I recognize now how many assumptions go unquestioned simply by not asking out loud the questions that arise in my inner dialogue. This seems to suggest that I am relating from deep within my own frame, unaware of its impact on me and unaware that these questions that arise are relevant to the whole and should be brought into the outer dialogue. These inner conversations reflect a more individualistic, constructivist sense of the world; to truly be constructionist they need to be brought into the external dialogue as well.
When these kinds of questions are both asked and answered internally, they link with other unspoken assumptions, creating the narrative that guides action. One such assumption was uncovered during my bracketing interview—my assumption that we would begin with shared understanding regarding design and destiny. It turned out we each held this same assumption without realizing it until we came face to face with conflicting meanings. Each of us was surprised to discover that others did not share their understanding of AI, design, destiny, or the purpose of our practice. Despite the fact that a common focus in our work is the challenge of creating shared meaning, we did not think to question our own frames. This alone suggests the importance of collaboration. Our practice provided us with an experiential appreciation of just how subtle our assumptions can be. Had I not started with this assumption but instead started with curiosity—*I wonder if we all share the same understanding for design and destiny*—we might have practiced levelising from the outset and inclusively found a frame for discussion that captured everyone’s interests.

**Levelising**

Our ability to engage in the full spectrum of levelising, I believe, was due in large part to participant competencies related to dialogical practice and their post-modern mindset. Their longevity in the field of Appreciative Inquiry meant they had practiced and engaged in successful dialogue, facilitated such opportunities for organizational groups, and were well versed in the importance of being open to multiple ways of knowing and to suspending beliefs. In addition, they espoused a post-modern worldview and they too were interested in aligning their actions with it. I also believe that having several participants who were more theoretically oriented
suggested that they would be comfortable with engaging in a process that required multiple 
levels of reflection and abstraction. Had the make-up of the group been heavily weighted on the 
practical side, we might have spent the majority of dialogue at level I and II.

There may have been other factors that contributed to our capacity to operate at level III 
and IV. In Gaskin’s (2007) research on levelising, she found that her participants spent the 
majority of their time in level I and II dialogue. She suggested several factors that may have 
contributed to this: the structure of their meetings, time constraints, and the theoretical focus of 
their conversations. We did not have a structured meeting; instead participants could take the 
time they wanted or needed to reflect on what others had said before replying. They in fact 
commented on this during their interviews as both a plus (time for reflection) and a minus (too 
much time). However, it appears that providing ample time for reflection is requisite to 
successful engagement at all levels of the levelising process.

Finally, Gaskin suggests the theoretical focus of their conversations was a deterrent. By 
thetical, I understood her to mean a focus on teaching the theoretical aspects of levelising 
rather than on practicing levelising. Gaskin, who served as facilitator of a group of colleagues, 
concluded that she spent too much time telling participants about levelising and too little time 
engaging them in levelising. I note this distinction because a theoretical, academic interest 
dominated our conversations; however, our interest was in broadening our understanding and 
forming a new practical theory for our work. This is what drove our practice of levelising. 
Overall, this suggests that reflective time, a practical focus, and dialogical skills are important 
factors to in a group’s capacity to levelise. Unlike Gaskin, I spent very little time telling 
participants about levelising. Instead, my colleagues and I practiced levelising through inquiry;
this practice raised our awareness that framing was ever-present and generative, which encouraged us to continue to levelise.

**The Framing Factor**

Levelising appears to be an effective practice for gaining awareness of one’s own frames as well as others’ frames, and that awareness, in turn, reinforces the practice of levelising. Certainly in our practice, framing was a recurring factor in our attempts to develop shared understanding. Awareness of the framing factor in communication is important for those who are interested in consciously co-constructing shared futures. It is too easy to use the same words and assume we mean the same thing, until we bump into hidden assumptions. People who work together and share a common discourse or role are most likely to be at risk of making such unwarranted assumptions. Learning to ask questions that uncover shared and diverse perspectives would be a valuable asset for anyone, but it seems likely to be an essential characteristic for leadership in an SBO.

The ability to recognize where, when, and which questions need to be asked is also an important asset for me as a consultant. This experience suggests that I have been listening to every client as if they understood (or should understand) language in the same way I do, which meant I could assume that they wanted to do what I wanted to work on. I am aware that as a consultant it is not my role to overlay my frame on others, nor to insist they develop my frame; however, I am now acutely aware that I must be vigilant in this practice for it can happen without even knowing it. Not all organizations that come to me for service want to change their culture or story, nor do they want to engage in collaborative learning. I need to be able to know the
difference. Being reflective in action (aware of my frame and the impact it is having) as I ask into their framing and the associated meaning of their words will help be do this.

*Substantive Dialogue Among Participants*

By October we were participating in substantive conversations about *design*, *destiny*, and *organizational design*, challenging one another’s perspective, actions, and understanding. In their closing interviews, participants indicated they experienced a real sense of collaboration and dialogue in our practice together, and when I asked them to say more about what they meant by each of these terms, they referenced the different elements of collaborative learning. This seems logical and natural since that is the practice in which we were engaged.

Most of them expressed experiencing meaningful dialogue in a safe and open environment. A number of them suggested that our capacity for this was the result of our AI focus and practice; as AI practitioners the importance of dialogical space and the concurrent behaviors that help create that space are well known and practiced. The two members of the group who dropped out, however, did not disclose their positions or reasons for lack of participation, which raises the question about whether it was a safe environment for those who did not feel comfortable with the forum or focus.

Part of creating a safe and welcoming dialogical space means it is safe for everyone, regardless of who shows up with whatever issues or interests. Once again, I see the impact of not asking my journal questions out loud. Had I asked the questions about lack of participation that I wrote in my journal, or some version of them, it might have provided the opportunity for Terri or Sam to safely express their more practical interests or issues with long emails. This may or may
not have shifted the focus of the dialogue. It might have encouraged two lines of dialogue, generated a conversation about process, or given them the opportunity to explicitly opt out.

Participants described the benefits of engaging with people with different perspectives and ways of understanding AI, design and destiny in the conversation and how important reflection on action and reflection in action were to understanding and developing clarity—of their own thoughts as well as others. Though no one used the language of levelising, we practiced this way of reflecting. Participants reflected on their actions (Level II) as well as recognized framing and the relevance of seeing themselves acting from their frames (Level III). These challenges in turn, invited us to look for other theories that might be relevant for Strength-Based Organizational design (Level IV).

Research Question #2: How Did Our Practice Relate to Understanding the Design and Destiny Process?

Levelising triggered an early shift in our focus away from the design and destiny steps in a 5D cycle. In alignment with my original interest, the dialogue explored the more complex question of designing organizations to be self-designing; in other words, to have an internal practice that results in continuous learning, conscious evolution, and sustainability. What seems to have occurred during our practice together is that we came to understand design and destiny as a process or practice, rather than an “it” to be implemented as a step in a sequence of events. We came to believe that what was needed for design and destiny was a practice that would align the organization and its members with Strength-Based Organizational visions or plans.
Two actions might have strengthened our practice and accelerated our ability to move towards a practical theory. First, we did not step back and see that our framing had shifted, so we missed the opportunity to explore what the possible ramifications of this shift in perception meant for design and destiny. In line with this, I wonder if a more conscious and intentional practice of levelising with regards to our process itself might have enabled us to see our frames at a much earlier point in time and subsequently move towards a new practical theory for organizational design.

Objectifying Emergent Practices

Much of the literature on post-modern management offers methods, practices, explanations and models aimed at supporting organizations interested in becoming an SBO. From this perspective, organizations are understood as systems that change over time as a result of learning (Argyris, 1995; Cooperrider & Shrivastva, 1987; Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Marquardt, 2002; Oshry, 2007; Senge, 1990). In order to participate in this learning and change process with awareness and intention, the practice of action research emerged directing attention to the importance of reflecting on action and engaging in cycles of action and learning (Argyris, 1976, 1995; Cooperrider & Shrivastva, 1987; Ludema, et. al., 2006, Peters, 2006, Reason & Bradbury, 2001). One of the more challenging learning practices encouraged by Argyris and Schon is the practice of double loop learning (Argyris, 1980), which calls members of an organization to examine their actions as well as the mental models that give rise to those actions with an eye towards aligning theory in action with espoused theory. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this was, in
fact, what AI promised to address, but in practice failed to do more than 65% of the time (Bushe & Kassam).

The predominant recommendation for the post-modern organizational structure has been to flatten the hierarchy (Anderson, et al, 2008; Davis & Chenneveau, 2005; Denning, 2001; O’Hara & Wood, 2005; Raelin, 2002; Senge, 1990; Schein, 1993). Many of my colleagues, including myself, interpreted this to imply that the ultimate goal was a flat and democratic organization. There are practitioners, including many of my colleagues in the AI field, who show allegiance to democratizing the organization (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2002). In fact, one of my colleagues indicated that the majority of the members of his consulting group believe that a democratic organization is the ultimate goal (personal communication, March, 2008).

On the other hand, there are those that make room for both. They recommend flattening the hierarchy, yet articulate the value of limited layering in structure (Beck, 1996; Craddock, 2006; Jaques, E. 1990). Beck, Craddock and Jaques all emphasize the importance of aligning the strengths and competencies of individuals with the roles and various functions of work within the organizational structure, noting that layers are associated with managing varying complexity within and without the system.

Making room for both surfaced in our on-line conversations a number of times. The move to a “both/and” perspective was typically stimulated by an apparent contradiction. For example, we talked about an SBO as flat and participatory and yet felt that some form of hierarchy was needed simply because of the complex nature of running an organization in the current global market. In another instance we talked about replacing evaluations in an SBO with valuations and yet later in the same dialogue coming to recognize that evaluation and assessment
are essential. Every time we realized we were narrowing our focus to exclude a practice someone pointed out the value of that practice from within a different but relevant context. This occurred until we found ourselves repeatedly coming to make room for ‘both/and’. What kept us moving forward was our commitment to the post-modern practices mentioned above, specifically cycles of reflection and action and dialogue.

In looking closely at our conversations where we came to “both/and”, there were mixed metaphors in our dialogical efforts to express the ‘how’ of organizational design for SBOs. For example, we turned emergent practices into codified steps or replicable models. A prime example is AI itself. In our conversations about how AI related to design and destiny. Sometimes our languaging suggested AI was a thing. Once AI became a noun, there were specific ways we could use the term; language structured how we thought, leading us to talk about implementation strategies and usage. Our language also reflected the tendency towards linear, mechanical modeling where we thought about replacing something that was not working with this new and better “thing”.

The literature in action research, dialogue, and learning reflects these same language problems. For example, Marshak suggests that organizations must shift “from one state of being to a fundamentally different state of being” (1993, p. 8), implying a letting go of one frame and adopting a new and better frame. Marquardt’s discussion of knowledge turns knowledge into a thing that should be shared and managed, removing it from the collaborative dynamic that generates it. Hattori & Lapidus levy criticism against teams who have leaders, citing them as “masquerading” as teams (2003, p. 99). It even showed up in my own comprehensive exam
paper where I criticize the “western organizational culture”, suggesting that it should be replaced with a new way of organizing based upon a new frame or theory (2006).

Post-modern ontological organizational practices are of value in SBOs, but efforts to explain them seem misaligned with the very essence of these ideas. In fact, the very idea that we understand them as some thing that adds value ignores the fact that these practices are emergent; coming to understand them cannot be separated from the worldview that gives rise to them. Understood from a mechanical worldview as “pieces of the whole” they are prime targets for reification. Once that is accomplished, we do what we are accustomed to doing: we implement, add, or use them as objects or models to achieve certain ends. This is what has occurred among many AI practitioners and the linguistic challenge was apparent throughout our dialogues.

This linguistic struggle was a significant focus of our conversations over eight months. It was our practice of levelising that kept shifting us away from mechanistic, dualistic thinking towards a perspective where we began to talk about processes and practices within a both/and way of understanding organizing.

**Research Question #3: How Did Our Practice Relate to Facilitating the Design and Destiny Process?**

Participants reported that they came to understand that the design and destiny process needs to address the way people engage with one another and how they work, as well as the structural elements of organizing. Specifically, participants pointed to the capacity to dialogue and inquire, make room for multiple ways of knowing, and be reflexive in nature. They emphasized the importance of being open to reflecting on actions and frames as well as the
willingness to collaboratively explore new ways of going on together. What is worth noting is that this is how they described their own experience of our practice together. Our practice seems to have been a microcosm of what we came to believe needed to occur at the macro level of the Strength-Based Organization.
Chapter Seven

Re-visiting My Practical Theory and Future Actions

In Chapter Three I argued that levelising would support alignment of my theory in action with my espoused theory. My results indicate that engagement in levelising with participants in the study resulted in such alignment. It also seems to have brought me greater understanding of myself; I am now aware of how prone I am to objectify my world and relationships. The consequence is that I see my practical theory and levelising in new light.

Prior to my research, I understood levelising as an individual communication tool, something I could do to foster communication and understanding. If I could do it “right” I would be able to communicate my frame and I could ask good questions to help uncover other people’s frames and assumptions. I now understand levelising as a social constructionist practice that allows people to facilitate one another’s understanding of their frames and assumptions. Without the other, we cannot know fully know the depth of our own meaning. Just like the proverbial fish in the water, we cannot see what is taken for granted. I need you to ask me questions and engage in dialogue to help me understand what it is I think I understand and what assumptions I hold, and you need me to ask you questions for the same reason. Participants expressed this very experience in their interviews and the results allowed each of us greater clarity of our view and at times our awareness that our actions were not in alignment with our espoused theories. A key to this practice was our willingness to hold our frames lightly and question them.

Srivastva, Cooperrider’s mentor and the inspiration behind AI, said the question we should be asking ourselves is, “How do we become facilitators of each other’s life” (personal communication, September 25, 2008)? This strikes me as highly relevant to my practical theory
and to my reason for undertaking this research. Facilitating one another’s life, for me, means helping one another gain clarity and vision, supporting the alignment of actions with espoused theories so that dreams can be achieved. Levelising appears to be one way of doing this.

As I mentioned, our penchant to objectify practices showed up in my findings as we struggled with language to find ways to talk about emergent practices. Individual ways of knowing showed up in wording and metaphor. Levelising allowed all of us to experience multiple ways of knowing and in that process recognize the importance of context and framing. I am still discovering the ramifications of what this means for daily living and client work, even as I write this paper.

At the outset of my research my theory in action implied that change was a progression towards the “right” or perfect way to organize. Our on-line conversations reflected similar thinking, which we learned to challenge. These challenges encouraged us to hold a “both/and” perspective, reminding us of the complex nature of whole systems. My practice of levelising has generated an experience that there is no one-right-way for an organization. Any frame or worldview can be “the best” depending upon a number of factors, including context and desired outcome. As Beck says, “When a new worldview emerges, the older systems do not disappear. Rather they remain subsumed in the total flow and not only add texture to the more complex ways of living, but remain ‘on call’ in case the problems that awakened them to service reappear” (1999, p. 3).
Future Actions

As with any action research, the purpose of my study was to engage in cycles of reflection and action in ways that would positively influence my future actions. In this section I will share the implications my findings and reflections have for my practice. In addition, I will discuss implications for further research and contributions my study makes to the field of Appreciative Inquiry and post-modern organizing.

Implications for My Practice

Based upon my experience and findings, I see that the most important thing I can do in working with clients is to be aware of my frame and how it is influencing my actions, to openly inquire into the meaning of concepts used by others in order to understand their frame of reference, and to develop a broad appreciation of their desired outcomes so that together we can create a means of achieving their goals. In addition, where possible, I will work towards relationships with others that invite them to join me in “facilitating one another’s life” as we seek to create optimal relationships and mutual understanding for how to go on together. I will need to take care not to objectify this practice but instead seek ways to have such actions emerge from within my conversations.

As a way of being, levelising shifts the fundamental nature of my relationship with my clients and colleagues. Instead of talking as if we understand one another, it means talking first as a means of understanding one another and then as a means for collaboratively developing a shared plan to deliver the desired outcomes. This change in action will naturally show up in the
way I engage with all clients and it will influence how I will work with those organizations interested in becoming an SBO.

The Consultant’s Ear

From my present point of view, as a consultant or colleague, listening becomes an essential practice. It is not just listening to the words a person speaks, however, but listening to hear the nuances from their lived experiences that are embedded in the meanings of their words. My previous understanding of the meaning of philosophical hermeneutics was an intellectual, academic appreciation. I understood what the concept meant, but that understanding had not influenced my actions. Over the course of eight months I had the opportunity to recognize that I did not share the same understanding as another because of our different experiences; the consequence is I now have an experiential understanding of the concept. This experience has filtered through to my actions and if I continue to be mindful of it I am likely to be more curious and less likely to judge.

From my current position, I am less attached to any specific frame, and yet I am aware that in any given moment, I will act from one. Again, if I am mindful, the continuous practice of levelising will inform my interactions. In addition, Scharmer’s Theory U provides a model to support my intention to suspend my beliefs and frame in order to listen to clients (2007; Senge et al). In brief, his practical theory for collaboration and innovation hinges on our capacity to be in truly open dialogue with one another—open mind, open heart, and open will. He refers to this place of openness as Presencing, and he offers insight into this open state.
In practicing *Presencing*, I will work towards listening with an open mind, open heart and open will, inquiring in ways that help me understand the client’s frame and their desires from *their* perspective. In accordance with Scharmer’s theory, I should be able to recognize when I am not *Presencing* by staying alert to my own inner voices. Whenever I hear the voice of the judge, the critic, or the cynic it will remind me to step back. Over time and with practice, I hope to increase my capacity to listen to my inner voices as advisors. By reflecting on their words, I should be able to discern missing information that I need to help me more fully understand my client, their needs, and the parameters under which we need to work.

For instance, imagine a situation in which a client tells me she is interested in improving trust and communication across the organization, but she is not willing to have an open door policy on upper level management meetings. I might hear the inner voices of cynicism and judgment surface through my own frame, “You’re not really committed to trust; you should be transparent—that’s what builds trust!” In such an instance, awareness of these inner voices offers me the opportunity to stop, and reflect. In this simple pause I may see that I am missing information: why do these meetings need to be closed? My mind and heart may then open and I can ask my client to *please say more about these meetings and why they need to be closed*. This practice has the potential to complement levelising, supporting my capacity to be open and present with my clients.

In this process, I am more likely to appreciate what my client is looking for, and they are in turn likely to gain clarity about what it is that they truly want and need. Once we understand the desired outcome and all the parameters are on the table, I will be free to offer a proposal that specifically addresses what they are looking for from their point of view. If it is not what I do or
want to do, my clarity of their desired outcomes will allow me to make a better recommendation for a different consultant. If members of an organization and I decide we want to work together to achieve their desired outcomes, the way forward should emerge as I engage in a levelising practice with relevant members of the organization.

**Possible Implications for Further Research**

My findings raised a number of questions, each one relevant to collaborative learning. These questions should be of special interest to organizations or groups of practitioners who want to further their understanding and knowledge in their field or develop creative and innovative ways to go forward. The following areas are worthy of study:

1. Effective web-based forums for virtual collaborative learning.
2. The relevance of learning styles and personality in the practice of (on-line) dialogue and cycles of reflection and action?
3. Creating a strong dialogical field when people are geographically dispersed and have different levels of interest in a topic.
4. Introducing and integrating levelising into current conversational forums in organizations (e.g., meetings, planning, review processes).

**Implications for Strength-Based Organizations**

The challenge in designing for SBOs is that the practices that are believed to be effective and relevant for an SBO, e.g., AI, dialogue, action learning, and reflective practice, are emergent practices. When understood and implemented from an objective perspective, their generative
value is at risk. Since frames typically remain beneath the surface of conversations and sometimes below awareness, members of an organization generally engage with one another as if they all share the same frame and the same meaning for the words that they use, just as my fellow AI practitioners and I did at the outset of our research. They do not often realize their frame is influencing what is possible in dialogue.

What is needed is a practical way for members of an organization to recognize their frames and how they are influencing their capacity to benefit from these practices. In addition, assuming that shared meaning is essential for conscious co-construction (an essential aspect of an SBO), SBOs need communication practices that will surface the different perspectives on a regular basis. In this way they can seek collaborative ways to identify relevant practices and practical theories for moving forward towards their vision and mission.

Levelising seems to be a bridging practice that surfaces frames and assumptions that inhibit or enhance conscious co-construction among organization members. Integrating this practice into meetings, planning, evaluations, and review conversations may offer members of an organization the same benefits that it did to our research group: the opportunity to discover the multiple ways of knowing that are present among the members, to understand how framing is influencing how they understand and what they see as possible, and to develop the capacity to step back from these frames in order to collaboratively generate practical theories about ways to go forward.
The challenge associated with design and destiny as well as successful post-modern organizational transformation seems to be the simple, yet complex challenge of intentionally aligning newly espoused theory with every day theory in action. The literature acknowledges this and, as previously discussed, offers methods, practices, and models relevant to reflective practice and post-modern organizing. The literature describing what is happening and what needs to happen is plentiful. This includes discussions related to culture and culture transformation (Cooperrider & Srivastva; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Schein, 2000), story and narrative and their impact on action (Berger & Luckmann; Bohm; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Cooperrider & Srivastva; Issacs), positioning theory and the role of language and relational dynamics (Gergen & Gergen; Harre & Moghaddam, 2003; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), and emergent practices—including AI, dialogue, action research, and reflective practice. All such discussions are important for the members of the “new” organization (Argyris, 1980, 1995; Cooperrider & Srivastva; Issacs; Reason & Bradbury; Schein, 1993).

What seems to be missing, however, is a systematic, step-by-step approach for engaging in cycles of action and reflection in a way that results in the exposure of the assumptions and frames that inhibit or enhance alignment. It may well be that members of the field of Appreciative Inquiry and organizational development have struggled in their efforts to help organizations evolve because they lack an ordered and progressive practice that will make alignment more feasible. My findings suggest that levelising may be a practice that will resolve this challenge.
Closing Reflections

My action research study has exceeded my expectations. I am certain that just engaging in eight months of dialogue would not have netted the impact that actually studying my practice has. Beginning with a reflection on my practice and developing an analysis and practical theory at the outset allowed me the clarity I needed to actually design a study that was highly relevant to my practice. The multiple data sources and my analysis of them delivered insights that would not have surfaced had we just engaged in conversation. In addition, discussing my findings and revisiting my practical theory in light of those findings deepened my understanding of how levelising relates to other post-modern practices. Finally, returning to my practice to examine how this study will impact my future actions generated even greater clarity for me on how I will engage with others, on future research I might consider, and on suggestions I might make for clients interested in becoming a Strength-Based Organization.
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Vita

Cheri B. Torres was born in Chicago, Illinois. As an “Air Force Brat”, she moved with her family approximately every four years. First, she moved from Chicago to Albuquerque, New Mexico and then to Los Angeles, California. At age eight, she moved to Concord, Massachusetts, then on to Alexandria, Virginia. She finally moved to Newtown Square, Pennsylvania where she graduated from Radnor High School. She started college at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts and subsequently transferred to Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where she graduated cum laude with a BS in Economics in 1974. She completed her Masters in Business Administration from Lehigh University the following year. Cheri worked for DuPont, Brown University, and Wheaton College before starting a non-profit organization to provide childcare resources and referrals in the community of Laurinburg, North Carolina. In 1990, Cheri moved to Maryville, Tennessee. While working at Maryville College she pursued a Master’s degree in Transpersonal Psychology from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Menlo Park, CA. In 1995, she and a colleague designed and patented a professional portable low ropes course and started their own business to sell the equipment and train facilitators. In 1998 she was introduced to Appreciative Inquiry and her business expanded into other areas of training and consulting. In 2004, she started the Ph.D. program in Educational Psychology and Research/Collaborative Learning at University of Tennessee-Knoxville. She has published five books and numerous articles in the field of Appreciative Inquiry and Experiential Learning. Cheri is married to Michael A. Torres, professor of biology at Warren Wilson College, and has two daughters, Laura and Carmen.