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Learning, the whole and Theory U: reflections on creating a space for deep learning

Abstract

Drawing on his experience of facilitating a two-day youth leadership development program in a socially depressed rural district in the Midlands of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, the author critically reflects on the processes engaged in and how they align, theoretically and experientially, with the philosophical perspective of nonduality and the social change model, Theory U. This paper, while exploratory in nature, will seek to locate the outcomes of the workshop processes within a paradigm that asserts the primacy of consciousness and Being, drawing on the nondual perspective and Theory U as critical frameworks to validate this position. It is also argued that this work is becoming crucial in social contexts where the current learning paradigms and outdated worldviews are not only failing, but threatening to bring about the rapid collapse of our civil and social institutions. The paper is offered as a discussion document rather than as a traditional scientific study.

Keywords: Theory U, deep learning, youth leadership, development, poverty.

JEL Classification: I25.

Introduction

The dominant worldview is that of scientific materialism, and in a work that attempts to challenge this position, co-editor Trish Pfeiffer writes that “the fundamental threat to human survival derives from a materialistic view that is altogether inadequate” (Pfeiffer, 2007, p. 14).

It is my contention that scientific materialism cannot be displaced simply by new conceptual models of reality, but by the lived experience of Being, also referred to as Essence (Almaas, 1986) or Presence (Senge et al., 2004). However, conceptual models that derive from the experience of Being carry a quality of authenticity where the word “points beyond itself” (Tolle, 1997).

It is within this view that I want to reflect on the processes engaged in when creating learning spaces, showing that Otto Scharmer’s Theory U (Scharmer, 2007a; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013) provides an elegant model, which offers conceptual clarity for reflection on what has been largely intuitive teaching and learning processes¹ (Pillay, 2007), as well as providing the tools for effecting critical action. But, more importantly, the model allows us to revisit the assumptions of leadership from the radical perspective of the primacy of consciousness.

In terms of theorizing about the research methodology, the approach was that of a participant observer within an unstructured methodological context that was framed by self-reflective philosophical inquiry. This is about the closest one can get to theorizing the research methodology because the process did not begin with a formal

research agenda. A data evaluation section concludes this paper as updated information recently obtained helps to triangulate the data.

1. Where are the leaders?

In the Ufafa rural district of Ixopo, an area immortalized by South African writer Alan Paton’s poignant book *Cry the Beloved Country*, an NGO, Woza Moya², struggles to meet the ever-growing demand for orphan support, hospice care and training in an area ravaged not only by AIDS-related deaths, but by the poverty that is a legacy of the country’s apartheid past. It may also be useful to consider the view that the AIDS phenomenon in Africa is located within the social domains of poverty.

In addition to all of this, local government bureaucracy is riddled with poor service delivery and corruption, so that basic amenities like water and electricity are seen as luxuries. This failure of socio-political leadership is counter-pointed by traditional, tribal leadership, which is now largely ceremonial in nature and generally characterized by male chauvinism.

It is within this context that one must appraise what the average youth in the area is exposed to in terms of leadership models. And given that many homes are without one or both of the parents, owing to death, even examples of family leadership are absent.

It is not surprising, therefore, to understand why Woza Moya saw it fitting to invite The Leadership Centre from the University of KwaZulu-Natal to initiate a pilot training program in Youth Leadership for thirteen

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¹ This has been documented in a section of my book *Nondualism and Educational Drama and Theatre*.

² Given the perspective of this article, “Woza Moya” is an interesting Zulu expression which means “Come Spirit”. The further link with Consciousness is the NGO’s origins in the nearby Buddhist Retreat Centre; Buddhism, perhaps, provided the first empirical approach to establishing the primacy of consciousness.

participants – ten high school scholars, two unemployed young adults and the Woza Moya youth coordinator. This training took place over two days in July 2007.

Although Zulu is the mother tongue of all the participants, they elected to use English as the medium of communication; a paradoxical fact which further highlights the depth of learning that occurred, because fluency of communication would have been compromised by the use of English.

2. Learning from within

The discussion of what took place in the training will be framed by Scharmer's simplified schema¹ for Theory U (Scharmer, 2007b), although it must be emphasized that it is only in retrospect that I am matching the processes of the training with the phases of the U process. It is my view that this not only validates Scharmer's work, but also alerts us to its potential in refining our own social change processes.

We have in Theory U both a theoretical and an experiential perspective, which links up with my own work in nondualism and educational drama and theatre. This work, in turn, has been reinforced by Tracy Huston's *Inside-Out* (Huston, 2007), where Huston's background in drama and theatre (like mine) meets the dynamic of Theory U. This alone speaks about new configurations of transformative theory and practice in our social and cultural landscape, emerging in a dance of seemingly disparate elements. But this is itself another exciting exploration.

In this paper I want to share an account of the leadership training program, not only as it specifically relates to Theory U, but also for allowing the interrogation of the concept of "the Whole" within the ontological perspective of nonduality.

For easy reference, I am including here Scharmer's simplified schema for Theory U (Scharmer, 2007b).

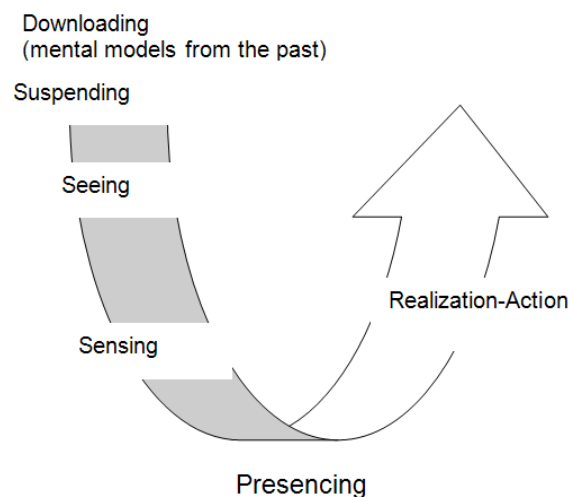


Fig. 1. The U process

3. Downloading

My work in change processes has specifically focused on the cognitive re-structuring process known as The Work of Byron Katie (Pillay, 2001), where an elegant Socratic-like questioning, consisting of four questions and a turn-around (Katie & Mitchell, 2003), leads very often to deep transformative learnings and an undoing of mental models that cause psychological pain and block creative action.

At the start of the Woza Moya program, after the brief introduction by the Centre Director, we first looked at the expectations of the participants in respect of the training program. Some of these were (in more or less their own words):

- ◆ to understand leadership; how to be a good leader;
- ◆ dealing with poverty and crime;
- ◆ how to develop respect;
- ◆ how to deal with fear;
- ◆ to learn about drama and how it can help the community.

It is interesting to note, that although almost all the participants have been affected by the death of a relative or friend through an AIDS-related illness, no one listed death or grief as issues to deal with. Sue Heddon, Woza Moya's director, observes that the entire community is largely in denial about the spate of AIDS-related deaths, and that death, as in many communities, is a taboo subject.

After listing the expectations, we went straight into experiential learning activities: we engaged in ice-breaking exercises that were not only fun for the group, but surprised them because their only mode of

¹ I say simplified, because there are more detailed elaborations of the model in Scharmer's book, Theory U.

learning is transmission teaching¹, where an authority figure imparts volumes of facts to be learnt for eventual regurgitation in an examination. Notwithstanding South Africa's official educational focus on outcomes-based education and a learner-centred learning environment, learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, especially rural areas like Ufafa, are still subject to an 18th century, industrial age model of learning, which is largely the outcome of impoverished educational resources and historically poorly trained teachers. This learning model, in spite of the legislation in South Africa, is framed by corporal punishment in many disadvantaged schools.

The first few games are designed to teach us about emotions like fear and anxiety. We reflected on the fact that a game called "Wink Murder" – where participants are killed by an unknown killer who winks at them – has the potential to engender a great deal of anxiety, even though we know it is just a game. The question was raised: Why is this so? But this was not answered; simply left open to possible insights that could emerge as we engaged in further learning activities.

In my view, the exercise that had the greatest transformative impact, and which set the direction of learning, is a criticism exercise developed by Byron Katie called "Speaking Behind My Back". In a variation of this exercise, participants first wrote down eight negative criticisms about people they know, but whose identity they were not asked to reveal, and eight positive criticisms about themselves. I noticed that there was some mild giggling in the group when doing the latter exercise, as if venturing into the terrain of positive self-introspection, coming from a social context primarily charged by negativity, was something that they found embarrassing.

Next, the participants each took a plastic document sleeve, with string threaded through the punch holes, and hung it from their necks, with the sleeves dangling down their backs. They were then instructed to walk around and place their negative and positive criticisms into the sleeves of fellow participants.

The participants had a lot of fun distributing their labels, but there was also a growing anxiety about what they had received.

When all the labels had been handed out, the group was instructed to work in pairs, exchanging the bag of criticisms with their partner. They were then shown how to receive the criticism, whether negative or positive. The steps are simple:

1. Partner A takes one of the criticisms and reads what is written, reconfiguring the criticism into a simple sentence. e.g.: "Someone says you are malicious."
2. Partner B, the recipient, goes within to find whether there is any truth in the criticism, even if the act of being malicious occurred ten years before and lasted only five minutes. When the truth of the statement is found, Partner B simply says: "Thank you, I can find it." If one cannot find the truth of a criticism within oneself, the response is: "Thank you, I cannot find it, but I am open to the possibility of it occurring in the future."
3. Partners then swap roles after each criticism is processed.

The outcome of the exercise allowed each participant to see that taking ownership of a criticism, especially a negative one, reduces its apparent power – and the fear it creates – to a fiction. They also learnt that to accept fully a compliment can be an empowering process, especially in a social environment where negative self-images abound.

After the exercise, the participants, especially the school learners, playfully continued criticizing their fellows, knowing that they now had the key to unlock their conditioned resistances to such labelling.

They also understood the power of mental models that operated in the games like "Wink Murder"; how an uninvestigated story can produce an emotion like anxiety in a mere game. More importantly is the insight that what we think we are protecting in ourselves is an illusion, something that has only an apparent existence.

In effect, we had navigated the domain of Scharmer's downloading: in this case the mental models of self and the other, which are, inevitably, the unquestioned constructions of our socio-psychological conditioning, and which, historically, have been the bases of many of our human conflicts. We have killed for being labelled by the other; in areas like Ufafa, killings based on political allegiances were not uncommon.

In particular, the criticism exercise deals directly with two of Scharmer's "three enemies"; namely, the Voices of Judgement and Fear.

I also do not think that Scharmer suggests that the phases that lead to presencing and realization-action are linear and this is reflected upon later.

4. Collapsing the rest of the U

For the next learning phase, I gave the participants the brief to create short dramatic scenes which had to reflect some understanding of leadership. No prior

¹ The participants arrived with note books and pens, ready to learn about leadership by writing down the information they thought they were going to receive from the "teacher".

theory in leadership was given. They had to do this in groups of four (one was a group of five).

I observed that the participants quickly self-organized; there were no discernable leaders within the groups, but the contributions of each individual flowed in a movement of creativity, where Richard Courtney's types of learning¹ are observed. The dramatic scenes that emerged spoke of: servant leadership; the rejection of command and control; and the need to root out corrupt leaders (while cognisant of the fact that these leaders have the resources to eliminate their opposition through assassinations).

The participants took great delight in each group's performance, and displayed innocence about the deep learnings that they had given rise to. But their learnings are significant against the backdrop of their actual experiences of leadership, where their community elders celebrate the corrupt politicians who have beaten the system with little or no legal consequences.

I reflected that there is something within the Field of Whole that had led to this emergence, but more about this later.

At this point it is useful to examine this learning activity against Scharmer's schema, which I have collapsed into one section because of the non-linear quality of the movement of learning.

In order to create the dramatic scenes, the participants would have needed to bring in their own observations of the world. Scharmer suggests that this seeing is from the periphery of the "me", which, in my view, is the initial activity of dislodging self-preoccupation and ushering in self-observation, and which, from the nondual perspective, is the witnessing mode that shifts consciousness from "thought/me" to "awareness/us" (Harrison, 2002, p. 90).

It is difficult to pinpoint accurately the shift to sensing, which Scharmer describes as being sensitive to the field of existence and "accessing the deeper layers of experience" (Scharmer, 2007b). However, I am advocating that this must have occurred given the kinds of learnings displayed by the participants, notwithstanding their social conditioning.

Because this can never be a linear process, and given my long and varied experiences with The Work of Byron Katie, it can be reasonably hypothesized that the domain of presence/presencing actually emerged when addressing our habitual downloading through the

criticism exercise, where a shift was effected from "thought/me" to "awareness/us". There is, I feel, also another ingredient, which I will interrogate later.

In a sense, then, I am arguing that a form of presencing framed seeing and sensing, leading to realization-action; that is, the dramatic scenes which were created in under ninety minutes – dramatic scenes that reflected integral understandings of leadership, and which were definitely not mirrored by the participants' common life experiences.

These learnings took place on the first day, while the second day was given to embedding these insights. Length constraints do not allow a description of the second day's activities, but in essence they would have contained the processes outlined above.

It is noteworthy to mention that when the group was asked to rehearse an appropriate song to close the workshop on the second day, they used their lunchtime to compose and rehearse an original song:

*I need respect,
Doing crime
Doesn't change poverty,
I want to change my life
From crime,
For evermore.*

5. Nonduality and the whole

By its very definition, nonduality, the philosophical perspective of non-separation, is about the Whole, which cannot be accessed by thought/me, but is the quality of awareness/us. But this is not a state to be attained, although within the domain of the conceptual, it might appear that way. It is what exists right now as the fact of Being, of Presence, prior to thought. All nondual teachings say that this obvious fact is obscured by thought, especially that specific movement of thought's incessant regurgitation of the past (downloading), so that the individual's transformative work is about "cleansing the doors of perception"².

Peter Francis Dzuiban makes an elegant case for the truth of the primacy of consciousness (Dziuban, 2006, p. 104), which is worth quoting in its entirety:

In other words, you want to be certain that what is said here is really *the way it is*.

There's a simple answer to that. It's found in the word *is*.

Think it through for yourself. Whatever is Truth, Reality, or "the way Life is" must be that which actually *is*. Whatever is going to be true, or be Truth,

¹ Intrinsic Learning: improvement of perception, awareness concentration, creativity, motivation, problem identification and problem solving, etc.; Extrinsic Learning: improvement of understanding of subjects, such as history, literature and so on; Aesthetic Learning: improvement of the quality of feeling, (that is, response to outside stimulus) and thus the tacit level of insight and intuition; Artistic Learning: improvement of older students' skills in creating theatre (in Richard Ron, 1995, p. 265).

² A phrase from William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and made popular in the title of Aldous Huxley's book.

has to truly *be*. It has to exist; it has to honestly *be present*, and never can change.

It doesn't matter what word is used – Consciousness, Self, God, Reality – only what *really is being* can be what *is real*. There's nothing deep or difficult about that. And if something *isn't being*, that means it doesn't even exist; it isn't present anywhere. So how could it function, or be any kind of Truth or Reality? It couldn't.

Notwithstanding the above, however, the identification with thought (that is, I think that I am my thoughts) is deep, and undoing the downloading of thought is easier said than done, and I alert the reader to Almaas's (1986) work on the subject.

6. Phase holograms

Given the above background to nonduality and the whole, there are a few loose ends that need tidying up in respect of the Woza Moya training as it relates to Theory U. What is important to investigate is the observation that there appears to have been no discernable linear movement from one phase on the U to the next after suspending the downloading of limiting thought patterns. There is a sense that these phases were co-mingled, and I am suggesting here that because consciousness, the Whole, is primary, this non-linearity can be understood by the holographic model (Bohm, 1980), not so much as a technical description, but as a plausible metaphor where the part contains the whole. This needs further clarification because of the conceptual confusion that could arise.

Firstly, there is the Whole, which is Being, Presence, the *what is*; and this, it is argued, is primary. But at the level of human doing, which is largely subordinated to thought/me (downloading), we can have movements down and up the U (provided downloading has been attended to) where, any part can exhibit qualities of the whole. In the Woza Moya example, the creation of the dramatic scenes and the learnings contained therein exhibited qualities of the complete U process, but yet, at a macro level of change, the group may still have been at the seeing phase.

7. The observer is the observed

In this analytical description of the training, it would be fallacious to present the illusion of the detached facilitator who is removed from the learning process. So, in effect, I have to reflect on myself within the dynamic of the created context as participant observer. At the level of thought/me there were various expectations for the training, and possibly expectations of how I wanted to be received by the group. I would place this in the downloading phase, and my own transformative work is just to

acknowledge that it is there, but rendering it impotent by not resisting its existence. This act of honest acknowledgement seems to shift one from thought/me to awareness/us, to a dynamic inner stillness that seems to *hold* the learning space, where something much larger than “me” is directing the show. (This can be accounted for conceptually and logically, but would require an entire paper on its own.) In this mode there is a quality of deep attention that only fades many hours after a workshop is over, when normal consciousness returns. From the perspective of “me”, it is an altered state of being; from the perspective of Being, it is simply *what is*.

For the research currently being done on the U process, the role of the facilitator, then, has crucial implications.

8. Experiencing an alternative view of leadership

In this experiencing of the primacy of consciousness, of the Whole, where is the other? Where are the leaders apart from me? If there is, factually, only the Whole, then leadership is contained in my very Being, in Presence.

Certainly, in our social constructions, there are leaders of all kinds: transactional, resonant, servant, participatory, transformational, etc. But these would be expressions of personality and context, while the wisdom of leadership is that which is embedded in the Whole, in Source. Accessing this Source, as advocated by Theory U, and as experienced in the Woza Moya training, leads to actions in our social fields that shift the focus from thought/me (the part) to awareness/us (the whole) because they are, in a profound sense, a mirror of the Whole.

9. The data evaluated

By the very nature of my role of facilitator of the workshop, I need to declare that researching the outcomes of the experiential processes engaged in were of secondary concern. That is, the main objective of the workshop was to impart skills through experiential learning that would bring about insights into leadership and different ways of seeing the world. It was only at a later stage that patterns were examined to account for what appears to have been deep learning in the group, and where the unfolding journey of learning could be mapped onto the Theory U model.

I see this secondary role of researcher as a positive element, because the initial intention was not to set up a learning space that would engender particular results (in this case, showing that the workshop processes can be mapped onto the Theory U model), which could be construed as a form of research contamination in that the researcher in engaging in a form of confirmation bias. Furthermore, it would be

naive to ascribe any definitive causal effects of the workshop experience for the participants, and the question of whether the emancipatory outcomes had been achieved is perhaps best left to the individual participants.

However, it has to be said that the opportunities to stand back and observe as a participant observer were spread throughout the two-day workshop, and this is substantiated by the video recording of the experiential exercises engaged with by the group. A short summary of the video recording, which highlights the specific outcomes already mentioned in this paper, is available on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dnruxlnJqE>). This video will also give the viewer a sense of the deep rural location of the area.

While this was not planned as a longitudinal study, it just so happens that other information emerged that allows for the triangulation of the data.

Seven months after the workshop, at a youth rally hosted by Woza Moya in February 2008, I was approached by the principal of the local high school; a school that had one of the worst matric¹ pass rates in the country. He remarked that all the learners who attended the workshop not only returned to the school and engaged in various forms of leadership activities – cultural projects, AIDS education, peer education, etc. – but that they had passed their examinations, which he felt was remarkable as his school had an average pass rate of between 40% and 48% in all the grades.

Finally, after seven years, in June 2014, I was able to meet with two of the learners who are now young adults and who work as Woza Moya youth coordinators. Firstly, they attribute their current position directly to the leadership training and are passionate about bringing about a change among the impoverished youth in the area. Furthermore, they were able to provide information about most of the workshop participants.

Of the two unemployed young adults who participated because they had nothing else to do, one (the male) is still an itinerant worker, while the female is in permanent employment.

Of the ten learners, two are unaccounted for, but it is likely that they are in some form of employment as they moved to the big city of Durban. One of the eight females is helping her mother at home looking after her siblings while the mother works. The father died from an AIDS-related illness. The rest of the learners are in stable employment, mainly cashiers at supermarkets or at the national road toll-gate. These are everyday blue-collar positions, but a far cry from

the menial work of laborers or sellers of roadside produce. It is even more significant against the national statistics for employment, which show that the labor market status for those males and females aged 19-25 years who have a matric and live in rural areas is 13.8% and 23.7% for females and males respectively (Statistics South Africa, 2012). The current employment status of the group is in the region of 75% (it could be higher if we include the two learners that are unaccounted for), and given that most of the participants were female (8 out of the 12), of which six are in employment and one is unaccounted for, we have an employment statistic that far exceeds the average.

Of course, there could be a host of other variables that could account for the interpretation given here, but it has to be acknowledged that we have the following verifiable data:

- ◆ Observed outcomes that are consistent with both the theory and research findings pertaining to the U model (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013);
- ◆ Information about behavior and scholastic success from the school principal;
- ◆ Two of the participants (one male and one female) gave feedback seven years after the workshop on the learning that was engendered, which they see as directly relating to their current positions as youth coordinators at Woza Moya;
- ◆ Feedback about the employment status of the group.

Conclusion

My experiences in workshops like the Woza Moya programme, as well as the evidence emerging in work like Theory U, is that we can realistically approach change processes if we fully acknowledge the primacy of consciousness and wholeness, even at the conceptual level. (In fact, there would be no need to acknowledge this fact conceptually if we are living it experientially.) Theory U, as a conceptual model, helps to anchor understanding in an undertaking that historically has been fraught with difficulties, because at some level there is always the operation of “thought/me”, leading to practices that tend to be very fragmentary, where there is effectively no deep access to what Scharmer has termed “open mind, open heart and open will” (Scharmer, 2007b).

But as many explorers of consciousness are now beginning to realize, shifting the focus away from thought to *what is*, Presence, allows thought to self-correct and subordinate itself to awareness/us. Thought, then, is a servant of the Whole, and learning is a movement of the Whole. And leadership would be an expression of this learning.

¹ Matric refers to the national exit secondary school examinations.

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