

## Inviting Collaborative Tools into my Workplace

*“One part is about being grown-up enough, confident enough, fearless enough to face my deepest, most secret dreams and to bring them out into the world. And the other part is to embrace all those forces that seemingly work against those dreams, those burdens I have chosen by the act of living and surrendering myself to those that I love. Celebrate the dreams. Celebrate the burdens, too. For it is in that delicious tension point—where dreams pull forward against the backward draw of one’s burdens, where life becomes a beautiful work of art.” ~ Shannon Hayes*

### **Introduction**

The exciting reality of taking this class now, after months of focus on an action research topic of “A Deliberate Practice to Rejoin Soul with our Work” is that I can journey from the realization of needing to practice in the space of the personal, inner work, to growing and implementing principles and tools central to my own values in concert with professional communities I engage. And the most exciting reality is that the practices are already finding ways into several workgroups, both those I supervise and those I collaborate with. It might be important to clarify, that I do not believe supervision excludes collaboration. But it does have its own inherent power dynamics that are different than collaborations among peers or divergent groups at the university. And I’ve come to understand that practicing in the personal space within your professional organizations has its own power of influence rooted in authenticity.

### ***Freewriting***

Freewriting has been a practice I’ve used since my first experience with it early in my graduate studies two years ago. But it’s frequency of use and where it is used is growing in my practice. I started by using it primarily in preparation for engagement in online classes. Then I found myself using it in preparation for writing assignments, and then in preparation for important discussions at work. But all of these have been practice in private with the exception of guided freewriting in some of the CCT classes or NewSCC workshops. Granted the nature and principle of freewriting is to bring yourself into a state of present awareness and unlock thinking just below the surface, so I’m not suggesting that the content of freewriting become public. Rather that introducing the concept and sharing the process with others has been something that I have only begun sharing with a few

people at work as a practice around preparing for important meetings. Freewriting has been successful in its intent, although I don't have any other evaluative measure than in the moment realization that it facilitates to its immediate purpose of helping to clarify my intent or hopes.

### ***Focused Conversation using ORID***

As part of a hiring committee, I was able to use the ORID steps as a way to navigate a complex series of interviews for a vacant position at work in the last couple weeks. We have a stakeholder team of interviewers and I came into the group knowing that they might have some bias to navigate around one of the internal applicants. With this in mind, I decided to try out the ORID (objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional) tool as a way to understand and move through my thinking carefully. The experience in class built my practice and understanding of the value this tool might use in finding blind spots in our thinking. I found both personal benefit and an opening of thinking among group members when I was able to share the why and how I came to interpretations through observations made. Instead of writing down the interviewee's responses to our questions, I wrote down observations about how they responded or how they engaged with the group or individuals present. At the end of our interviews, the decisional component came easier to me than the rest of the committee and I speculate this as true because I used this system.

An important depth of understanding that came to me later with Jeremy's gentle nudging is the value of practicing these tools for ourselves in order to better understand how they work in different circumstances, but also how they work for me personally before introducing them to others in a facilitative role. Somehow I knew this and chose to initially practice this way, but at a different level of understanding, from living what I believe. And now I'm thinking this helps manifest any practice in support of my practice to continually grow my listening skills in that it might be possible to practice being a better listener to myself and have that translate into better listening for others, and as a servant leader of such practices.

### ***Supportive Listening***

Supportive listening is something I've practiced in a few CCT classes as guided by the particular application and framework (coaching in Dialogue class, critical friend in Action Research class, and as a participant in the dialogue process). Yet the supportive listening practice in class this semester revealed many insights to me. First, this tool intends gentle guidance in support of the teller; and there are many ways this can be done. Yet I definitely prefer to offer focus on the teller, allowing natural space for silence, and carefully crafting and executing questions to support them in finding their own clarification and possible solutions to their problem. The exercise and comments from other observers helped me value that this might be important to my own understanding of the process and transparency in how I might

offer listening to others. This also connects with what a fellow travel companion this summer helped me understand; that this kind of conversation is rare and empowering for the teller. And most striking was this experienced facilitator's comment that the practice is difficult as the listener, knowing what questions to ask when, knowing when to support silence, and reading the subtle language of the teller (not just words).

Weissglass defines many forms of listening, active, passive, inattentive, pretend, conversational, argumentative and informational, before suggesting a definition for constructivist listening as "one that is for the benefit of the talker. The goals are to encourage the talker to reflect on the meaning of events and ideas; express and work through feelings that are interfering with clearer thinking; construct new meanings; and make decisions."<sup>1</sup> And yet I feel this term of constructivist is a bit too laced with structural undertones to fully explain the flexibility and adaptability the listener too must practice in order to support the talker in the process.

I can only speculate that this natural growth into supportive listening for others is growing because of paying attention to listening to self. As shared in my Action Research paper, I am choosing to become a better listener and it might be possible to practice being a better listener to myself and have that translate into better listening for others. I've found in recent dialogues the ability to listen to what I am and am not saying (and taking notes with this focus) as a kind of awareness note taking that can be later revisited in reflection. I find myself toggling between attentive listening to what is placed in the space and attentive listening to myself.

From my Action Research project, I became aware that I need to continually practice attentiveness to the seeds and the environments conducive to my journey so that I can help nurture the ones I feel to align with what I hope will connect me to becoming my best self and in presence for others to become their best selves. Implementation and qualitative evaluation must be practiced hand in hand in the context of paying close attention to my body and developing guiding questions rather than metrics related to my current beliefs around living an honorable life. The work I bring forth from my own practice might be practiced more from the position of values or principles rather than a focus on the tool or one method of implementation.

### ***Dialogue Hours***

At this point in my development in the Critical & Creative Thinking Program, I have experienced many dialogue hours in the classroom and in NewSCC workshops as a participant. But I've only led them 3-4 times now with an assistant close by. The most recent facilitation was the practice that gave me confidence that I have the

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<sup>1</sup> [Weissglass, J.](#) (1990). "Constructivist listening for empowerment and change." *The Educational Forum* 54(4): 351-370. (S1)

principles and practices embodied well enough to lead a group on the spot. Our last workshop this semester found our group wanting to use some of the tools we experienced in the previous workshops to engage with the complexities of diversity, inclusion and equity in our lives and workplaces. Perhaps because our instructor wanted to focus on the content of exploring our own diversities rather than new tools, and because we were encouraged to practice and facilitate ourselves, and because I sensed others less comfortable in the facilitation, I found myself offering to facilitate a dialogue hour on the spot; no preparations, no help from Peter or Jeremy's book, no script. Yet I found the words to share the process and principles behind the rules of engagement without the struggle story I have fabricated in my own mind. I broke through my fear of failure and realized I actually own and live enough of the process to accept responsibility and to implement a dialogue structure. And while it may not seem important to mention this at first, it's very important in my own development as a facilitator because it became a way of knowing that I have embodied the principles and process enough to share with others.

*"The only difference between fear and adventure is how much you breathe." ~ Rob Kalnitsky*

Important to this understanding was the feedback I received from the group on my explanation of the process and principles of engagement. And I will need to develop a tool for receiving this feedback in future applications. I might develop a Critical Incident Questionnaire similar to that we experienced in class, but I should also spend some time with this as it relates to the workplace rather than the educational context it was developed in. The Plus-Delta framework would be appropriate in the context of honoring meeting times and receiving feedback on process. The Critical Incident Questionnaire would allow for emergent content as well.

This last week I opened the discussion with my supervisor concerning the topic of management, leadership and our core leadership team's hopes for how we work together and as a unit. I realized this was necessary during the first or second workshop of this class. Why? Because we have some ripe opportunities emerging from our Building and Properties (B&P) leadership team: we have a new Director of Facilities that is in the space of creating a vision for our unit and we have the reality of merging our field operations with our B&P unit underway. And with the original commitment of the previous director and the continued commitment of this director to offer all B&P staff the Turning Point experience through Cornell, we are generating shared experiences and language around relationships and workplace dynamics in the context of cultural change.

Turning Point is a five-day leadership program for front-line staff designed to "increase self-awareness of personal leadership style, attitude, skills, and behavioral impact on others, improve communication and relationship-building skills for inspiring, engaging and motivating others, and design an individualized learning

plan that makes a difference to the individual and organization.<sup>2</sup> So for us to walk our values and avoid hypocrisy, I started a discussion with my supervisor who then engaged our entire team in an introductory discussion around the question of *who are we?* In this meeting I was surprised to find that many of us are independently thinking about related questions! This seems an opportunity to try a dialogue exploration or multiple dialogue explorations around the culture we want to grow, and a way to practice many of the principles of honoring diversity in our workplace while growing our respect for each other in deeper ways. We agreed to make a special meeting to experience a dialogue hour together in the next two weeks and our director has asked me to facilitate the process. So I would like to explore the idea of using a *third-thing*<sup>3</sup> much like we used Parker Palmer's "There Is a Season"<sup>4</sup> as the prompt for our dialogue. With this tool, I need to spend some time thinking about the tensions of some people wanting something tangible out of the first dialogue vs. the value of experience to understand the process and not necessarily connection to content. And if I do choose to use it, take stock of its effectiveness through feedback and reflection.

*"In Western culture, we often seek truth through confrontation. But our headstrong ways of charging at truth scare the shy soul away. If soul truth is to be spoken and heard, it must be approached 'on the slant.' I do not mean we should be coy, speaking evasively about subjects that make us uncomfortable, which weakens us and our relationships. But soul truth is so powerful that we must allow ourselves to approach it, and it to approach us, indirectly. We must invite, not command, the soul to speak. We must allow, not force, ourselves to listen." ~ Parker Palmer*

And while I appreciate the idea of one small change at a time, for the purpose of this plan for practice I will attempt to imagine how the five-step dialogue might be used outside of this immediate application. I am starting to think about how it might help facilitate future collaborations of other committees I'm involved with around creating new programs at work: re-engaging the vision for the station grounds and other planning committees looking for ways to grow our roles and our visions. Or setting up a similar structure to the CCT Collaborative Explorations, participants might use dialogue as a way to grow our Harold D. Craft Leadership Program<sup>5</sup> beyond next January's experience together. With the experience of introducing this to our B&P leadership team, I will have more time to speculate and think about ways this might extend to other communities through a continuum of reflections.

### ***Check-Ins and Think-Pair-Share***

Freewriting and Check-Ins might also be used without the full five-step dialogue as a way to start off a meeting where expansion of thinking is not necessarily the goal.

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<sup>2</sup> Turning Point Curriculum at Cornell University. Retrieved from [https://www.hr.cornell.edu/life/career/turning\\_point.html](https://www.hr.cornell.edu/life/career/turning_point.html)

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, Parker J. 2004. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco, CA. pp.92-93

<sup>4</sup> Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. 2000. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco, CA. pp.95-107

<sup>5</sup> Harold D. Craft Leadership Program at Cornell University. <https://www.hr.cornell.edu/life/career/hdclp.html>

And the Think-Pair-Share might be an alternative to a go around of check-ins. Implementation can be easily structured when co-hosting or organizing meetings I'm inherently seen as leading. But I'm also thinking this might be an interesting tool to suggest to our SHEM (Safety, Health, Environmental Management) Committee for Greenhouses at Cornell. To me many of the subcommittees operate well and accomplish their goals. But the larger committee meetings seem to run quite loose and unstructured with reports from the smaller subcommittees dominating our time. We have one meeting a year to check-in on our mission and this seems an opportune time for introducing the five-step dialogue. But the Check-Ins and Think-Pair-Share might work in the meetings between as a way to build more respect among committee members, give structure to the need to share, and offer more equity at the table. Additionally the Group Zap or other post-it-note activities offer ways to synthesize information in community. So I could plan the mission check-in with this as a tool to collect thoughts into groups that might allow us to compare the current statement against our current actions and thinking. But I feel I need more practice with using this tool for myself before I'm able to facilitate its use well in a group.

### ***Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Principles***

While our class did not introduce any new tools during the last workshop of the semester around the principles of diversity, inclusion and equity, we did use many of the tools in our toolbox from the previous two weeks to navigate this complex discussion among ourselves. And still the memory that is sticking for me most consciously today is that of our discussion around honoring holidays in the workplace beyond offering equal time off. Up until this dialogue I had not thought about the culture of the workplace around unspoken behaviors in holiday preparations. And a confirmation that the entire world is diverse surfaced for me. Therefore a multitude of more obvious and subtler manifestations exist every day! Much like getting to know the subtle differences between plants, and the complexities of how they grow across the seasons and their life cycles, a greater appreciation for how they all are intertwined in the beauty of one existence grows for me; this old lens that now includes a filter of people allowed to pass through creates a new lens for seeing. Looking through this new lens, I see the connections and differences as beauty of the diversities that is life; you don't have one without the other, an inseparable whole. The important reminder for me is to choose to look through this lens more often.

Besides being part of my leadership values, I've come to understand that my value of integrity is also at the root of inclusion and equity in many diversity awareness initiatives. And part of the trouble I had working for my previous employer was the lack of integrity between the college and the arboretum around areas of exclusivity, consensus and gender discrimination. I now work for an institution that takes diversity, inclusion and equity seriously in recruitment and academic and workplace dynamics. And this will be a catalyst for opening discussions. Yes, some of this

might be hidden behind an institutional mask. But what's important for me to realize is that I have the power to make people I interact with feel respected and valued anywhere and everywhere. "Simply giving a class on diversity will not erase... bias. Indeed, even the best development programs will not erase most of these deeply rooted beliefs. Development can only help us to become aware of them so that we can make a conscious effort to change."<sup>6</sup> And while I have inherent power in my position of leader for our greenhouse and grounds team, I also have to temper that power and work to empower the team as a whole.

### ***Daily Writing – One tool for Evaluation through Reflection***

Important to my own process of reflection is writing with a reflective intent. The more I write and share with others, the more clarity I feel in my own. I have discovered some of my own personal obstacles and biases, connections between my personal narrative and life choices, repeated behaviors and beliefs that need further clarification and maybe letting go of to move forward, and connections to continual change and growth in the context of ecology and spirituality. Keeping a journal has been and will continue to be a central method of bringing ideas into the present for me to observe and evaluate against bodily sensations and effectiveness of actions intended. The journal may be a rough expression of ideas and my photography blog a place of sharing my journey as an artist and human being.

But the thing about keeping journals, notebooks, or blogs is that you have to revisit them in order to make the most out of them. You have to flip back through old ideas to see what you've been thinking. Much like my practice of revisiting my daily writing and reflective papers for this project, "Once you make sharing part of your daily routine, you'll notice themes and trends emerging in what you share. You'll find patterns in your flow. When you detect these patterns, you can start gathering these bits and pieces and turn them into something bigger and more substantial."<sup>7</sup>

I need deadlines and goals in order to facilitate honoring the time needed for such work. And without graduate studies as the catalyst after May 2015, I intend to grow my daily writing into the end of the day activity at work as a way to gather thoughts to be later reflected upon. I find this time of day to be the least interrupted and a time naturally focused in preparation for the next. By creating this self-imposed mini-deadline I can build towards posts to my blog in the larger context of collaborations and personal development. And these posts can then be used more readily in a periodic reflection of patterns, connections and gaps in the larger framework of my life and work.

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<sup>6</sup> Clark, Donald R. "Leadership and Developing Diversity". Referenced from: <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/diverse.html>

<sup>7</sup> Kleon, Austin. 12 March 2012. "Show your Work." <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2014/03/12/austin-kleon-show-your-work/>

## ***How to Further Support Implementation, Growth and Evaluation***

Of course, implementing these tools in and of themselves even with evaluation practices in place for each, there are other actions that might support the broader support of tools as a group:

- Create a reminder system of the tools – a short list of sorts corresponding to the 4Rs (respect, risk, revelation and re-engagement) and action research cycles (reflection/dialogue, constituency building, evaluation and inquiry and planning).
- Take this paper and organize into applications by meeting/engagement and the processes that might be used in each given my current understanding of their power structures and relationship dynamics.
- Continue a Professional and Personal Development Workbook once per week reflecting back on facilitation and listening in my workplace.
- Formulate/clarify my own principles and post short metaphors for them in my office at work and in blog posts to share. As I've attempted to formulate them in my own understanding, metaphors of gardening might at first allow me to share and clarify them so that they embody as my principles.
- Participate in more facilitation and continue to reflect and compare experiences. Seek funding for Digital Storytelling Facilitation workshop (go back with more tools in my bag and more clarity in why it interested me in the first place), Omega Institute Women's Leadership Center Workshop "Nature as Mentor" or "A Woman's Leadership Intensive", the Harold D. Craft Leadership 5-day experience at Cornell next January and/or The Center for Courage and Renewal Retreats.
- Research how/when to participate in a Clearness Committee focused on my leadership gaps. Reflection is a powerful tool to help think about my behaviors, beliefs and values and how they are manifest in our workplace. Yet Jim Hunter suggests that as a leader you need to come in and set the standard, understand our gaps, and create a healthy tension in the organization so people grow.<sup>8</sup> And it all starts with the leader opening him/herself to the process in the presence of others.
- Offer to facilitate supportive listening or dialogue for my classmates as I continue the CCT program (already in practice the last two semesters but I need to honor that not everyone will want to participate). And follow

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<sup>8</sup> Simon, Tami. August 2014. "Jim Hunter on Servant Leadership". Retrieved from: <http://www.dailygood.org/story/786/jim-hunter-on-servant-leadership-tami-simon/>



through with initial discussions with main campus greenhouse managers, creating a space to explore staff development ideas together. Continue building and fostering communities of support and practice among NewSCC participants and Cornell University facilitators.

- Revisit problems seen in UC Berkeley plan with the question of how to make an implementation plan with teeth – instead I’m thinking about the tensions between an institutional plan and empowerment of members.
- Seek further ways to evaluate facilitation tools starting with those we did not cover directly through experience in our classroom this semester (i.e. Full Participation Survey and Force Field Analysis). Additionally seek quarterly feedback from my staff and my supervisor on the actions and behaviors I’ve chosen to focus my attention.

### ***Being a Collaborative Agent***

I am still wondering about the concept of transparency as it relates to vulnerability as a facilitator. As Jeremy noted, “understanding how to balance facilitating a process directly with explaining how one is facilitating is an area to be developed for anyone taking on this role.” He also clarified the concept of listening and responding, “which may be quite fundamental to deeper facilitation but might actually not be used in many situations where people label themselves as a Facilitator.”<sup>9</sup>

And this brings me back to Brené Brown’s TED Talk exploration of this concept in “The Power of Vulnerability”. In her candid talk about the discoveries of her research regarding human connection, she shares that in order for us to allow for connection, we have to allow ourselves to be really seen. And people who have a strong sense of worthiness, have a strong sense of love and belonging simply because they believe they are worthy. They have a sense of courage to be imperfect and the compassion to be kind to themselves. She believes that true human connection is the result of authenticity often disclosed through the face of vulnerability. The people in her study who had a strong sense of worthiness and deep connections with other human beings fully embraced vulnerability, “what made them vulnerable made them beautiful.”<sup>10</sup>

It might be important to clarify; today I feel that embracing vulnerability does not mean taking the position of sharing intimate stories or being completely soul revealing with your role as a facilitator. Rather the transparency is honesty with self about your role, your hopes and your biases brought into facilitations with others and sharing the reasons behind the processes as intent of empowering others to learn more than the content of discussion. This kind of authenticity allows for

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<sup>9</sup> Szteiter, Jeremy. Email dated 6 August 2014

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Brené. (December 2010). TED Talk. [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html)

meaningful connections in the context of empowerment of learning and participation choice beyond the immediate experience. Leading facilitation with this principle, I hope to live the values of integrity and equity. I value the uniqueness of people and the personal experiences and narratives they have crafted for their lives. I believe each person has the capacity to become their best selves and that our humanity depends upon bringing our best selves into community where we might discover meaning to our lives and creative solutions to our biggest problems. How people perceive vulnerability is an important mindset to their own worth and the worth of others. So at the root of my view of facilitation is being a collaborative agent.

Congruent with this idea is the realization that our first experience with a collaborative tool is not necessarily the how-to of implementation for ourselves. The complexity of applications in all our diverse experiences will help shape them into our own as we develop into collaborative agents. To borrow a metaphor from Michael Jones, we need to travel the path of inviting collaborative tools into our workplaces with a candle rather than a flashlight, allowing for the natural development from purpose.

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