

## Art of Participatory Leadership Practitioners' Gathering

14-16 March 2012

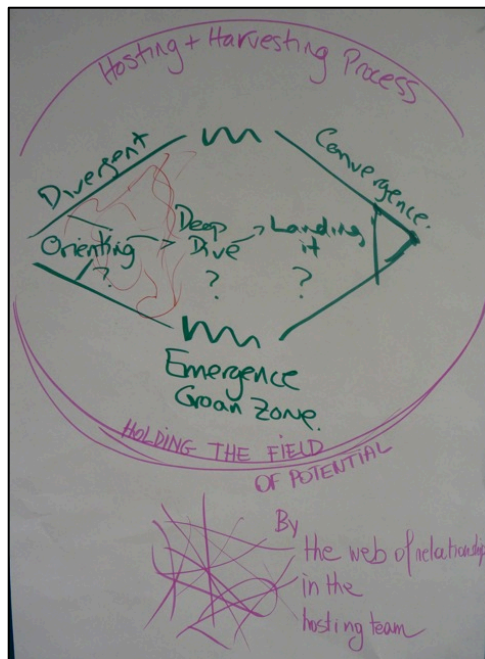
*For this second participants gathering, we were relatively few. We made a conscious choice to go ahead and meet as planned, despite our small numbers, to capitalise on the opportunities that this circumstance presented. One of our insights from the first gathering was how important it is to carve out the space and time needed to go deep and wide, for the resourcing this offers both the individuals and the collective.*

The purposes of our gathering were amply fulfilled:

- to bring our practice to next level
- to work together to create shared resources
- to support each other to develop our inner conditions to work skilfully at a strategic level
- to continue building the picture of our context
- to work more with the less tangible
- to support localisation in the different parts of the Commission.

### INNOVATIONS IN OUR PRACTICE

#### Iterative learning cycle



If designed and hosted well, every gathering, every step in a process, goes through a cycle of divergence, emergence and convergence. Harvesting was named as 'capturing the legacy' in a way that it can travel out to the wider community/system, and in order to take next steps.

One of the intentions of the hosting team was to have a real 'meta-harvest' of our gathering by the end of the three days. This meant building in time to look back at what we were learning, what new knowledge we had created after each cycle. So during the gathering we carved out regular moments where we would sit together and inquire: what can we see now that we didn't see before? This is a practice that can lead to

the discovery of new territory.

As a result of this experiment, we articulated an iterative learning cycle that includes the following steps each time:

- connection to purpose (why are we doing this, really?)
- creating space for the collective to diverge, stay in emergence, and then converge
- articulate what is the new knowledge we now have

- wonder who we need to invite next time, so that more of the system can be included, and divergence can go wider, emergence can go deeper.

Being intentional about applying what we learn each time can allow us to be much more ambitious in our scope and shared purpose.



We also saw more clearly the **interaction between the collective dynamic and the individual dynamic**, recognising the importance of allowing the individuals the time and space to 'metabolise' the process and output from each iteration of the cycle - each in their own unique way - so that their individual contribution to the next iteration of the collective cycle can help the

divergence to go wider and the emergence to come from a deeper place.

It was recognised that people of a more introverted nature benefit from **solo time** (ideally in nature) and **journaling** time, while the more extravert often need to be in conversation with others to make sense of their learning. It is important, then, to give sufficient space and flexibility to cater for the full range of needs, for best results.

**Next minimal elegant step - designing for emergence**



elegant step in pursuit of our purpose.

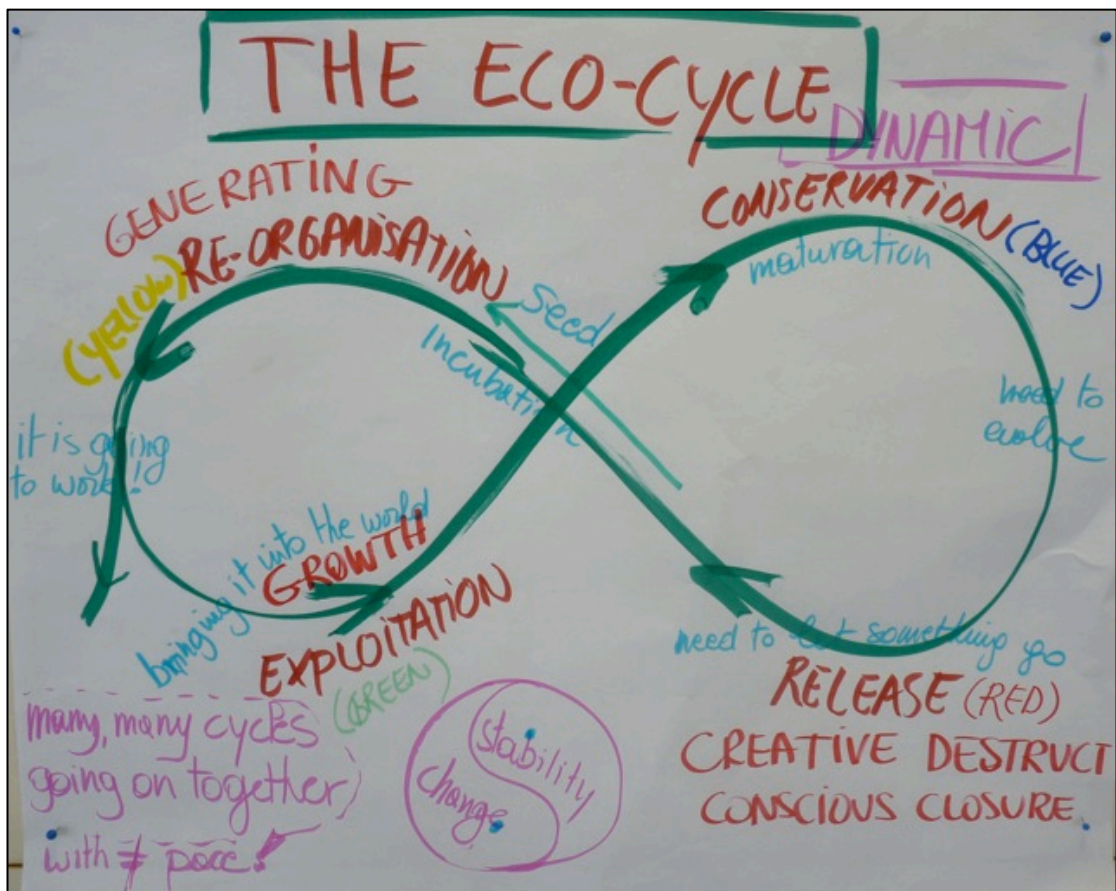
We could see the design of the next day only at the end of the previous day. This suggests a strong departure from the business as usual of 'predict and control' that has us designing a three-day programme up-front. When you are in an emergent process - as one always is when working inside a complex system - the protocol is: probe - sense - act - probe - sense - act. All we can do is take the next, minimal,

## CREATING SHARED RESOURCES – 2 MODELS

Hendrik and Maria shared with us two models that they have been working with in a context outside the Commission. These models provided an extremely helpful framework that helped us structure our time together and generate some very relevant insights for our context.

### The eco-cycle model

Management circles are familiar with the 'S-curve' model which describes the process of growth and maturity of industries and organisations. The eco-cycle [model](#) introduces two other aspects of living systems (individual and collective, biological, etc.) which are not considered by the S-curve, namely their death and conception; destruction and renewal. It is important to understand that the cycle is describing a dynamic, an ongoing movement that is happening all the time, and that has the potential to spiral up after each iteration, if we but learn and evolve as we go. We can distinguish four phases:



**Growth** - high energy, lots of new ideas and trial-and-error learning. Bringing a seed, a new idea into the world. Resources are spread over a variety of projects or activities. Participatory Leadership in the European Commission and in the world are clearly in the growth phase.

**Conservation** - after a while the open space becomes crowded, competition starts to require efficiency. Focus shifts to consolidating and conserving resources; the forest has grown to maturity. We hear a lot of stories about how the EC system is seeking to consolidate its functioning, even with fewer resources. Almost everyone present at the gathering felt the threat of this. The positive side of conservation is about preserving the story and the legacy, maintaining continuity, taking care of knowledge transfer. Here we need to continually reconnect with purpose.

**Creative destruction** – the best analogy for this phase is the forest fire, needed to renew the whole ecosystem. The system might appear to have been completely destroyed, but this is not the case. This release phase may require dismantling systems and structures that have become too rigid, have too little variety and are not responsive to the current needs of the context. It is always about the need to let something go.

**Generation** – In the forest, after the fire, the seeds now have light and open space to start growing. In organizational terms, this phase is not about increasing efficiency or even effectiveness. Instead, the need is to create connections, mobilise resources and skills to create the next generation of effective (and eventually efficient) goods and services.

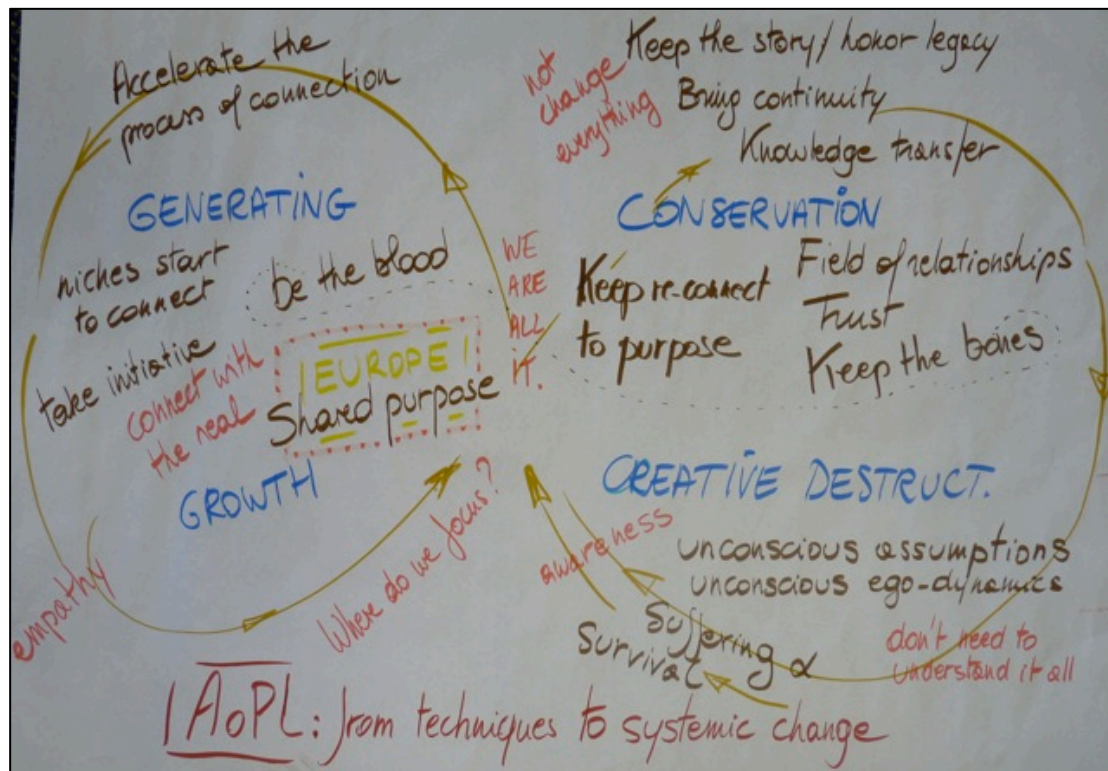
We worked with this model in different ways, and at different levels:

**Orienting** – Where is my context situated in the cycle? How does this knowledge inform the next step we would need to take? We can see how any participatory event can fit into the life cycle of a project or an organisation. Where we are in the cycle determines the kinds of questions that can most usefully guide the inquiry. You can start anywhere on the loop, but understanding the eco-cycle situates this moment as a stage on a journey – and the journey must traverse all the stages in order make the potential manifest.

Inside a complex system like the European Commission (and the landscape in which it is situated: the EU and the world) it is important to bear in mind that many eco-cycles are going on at the same time, all in different phases and going through the cycle at different speeds (think about the different relative paces of technology development and the legislative process)!

**Storytelling** – A number of us told stories of working with participatory leadership in our individual professional contexts, while the others listened through the filters of the four phases of the eco-cycle. That generated a huge glut of different coloured cards that we clustered on boards. Then we voted on which points we felt were most essential, to start shaping patterns in the complexity.





## Insights into our practice in the Commission

Working intensively with the eco-cycle model for most of 3 days, we came to the following insights about our practice in the Commission:

- The initial phase of introducing participatory leadership is over.
- We see some conservatism in the entry-level training.
- Perhaps the practice needs to shift to a different level. It's no longer about bringing process practice into a context, demonstrating value of practice, etc. Now it is time to identify which conversations we need to stimulate, because they need to be had. **What are the conversations that matter so much they need to be hosted now?**

## The Transition Management model

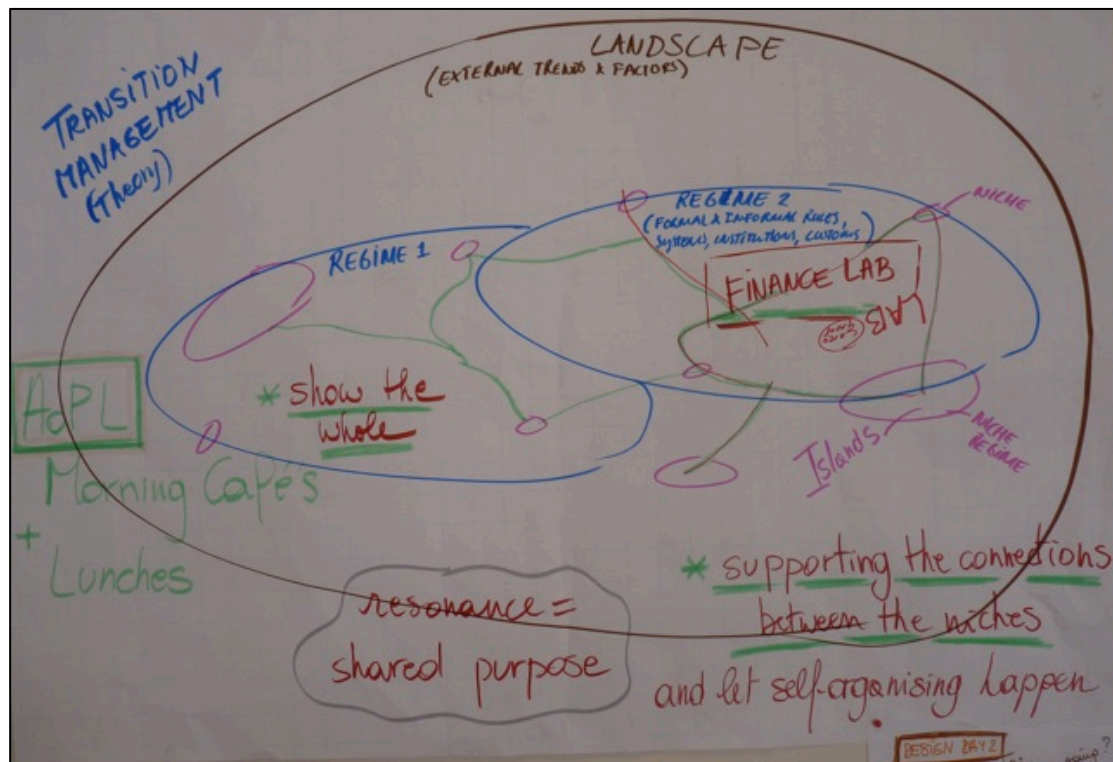
As part of our story-telling around the eco-cycle, Hendrik Tiesinga described how he was using this model with the [Finance Innovation Lab](#) project in the UK.

[Transition Management](#) is an alternative model of environmental governance which seeks to guide the gradual, continuous process of transformation of socio-political landscapes, socio-technical practices and the structural character of society from one equilibrium to another.

The model distinguishes three distinct levels:

- **Landscape** (Macro) - the wider (global) context we are in; forces from outside the system (regime)

- **Regime** (Meso) - the dominant practices, rules and technologies (conservation) that provide stability and reinforcement to the prevailing system
- **Niche** (Micro) - islands, places inside the regimes where people start to do things differently. Niches are where all change happens. Regimes change when enough niches are interconnected to reach a tipping point. What is needed now is to support the connections between the niches, so people can get to know each other and start to work differently.



We can also see niches as spaces we carve out from the frenetic tempo of business-as-usual, in order to sit down, slow down and reflect. These practitioners gatherings are an example. These are niches where we can do things differently process-wise. We suspect that innovation can come from here.

In the context of participatory leadership in the Commission:

- Who are the seed-holders of some important areas where participatory leadership has made a difference that should be connected?
- What is the conversation underneath the conversations that needs hosting?

From the Open Space session on day 2, we saw other niches that would benefit from connection. Specifically, connecting the niche of participatory leadership with the policy niche represented by DG CLIMA, where there is a call to innovate in response to a newly recognised need. At the moment, there is a separation between the 'what' and the 'how'. Participatory leadership is a promising path towards finding innovative ways to create policy.

In the policy eco-cycle, each phase requires different forms of innovation. There are different 'hows' along the cycle. How can the innovative approaches independently taking root in the Commission and in Europe learn from each other?

Where are the **pilots** that can help us to learn? Taking on policy-making is tackling the heart of the beast. One very promising example we saw during the gathering was Digital Futures, an initiative led by DG INFSO in a very participatory way. Some members of our community of practitioners are now more closely involved with this initiative, and will tell the story in future gatherings.

## IMPORTANT THEMES THAT EMERGED

- **Orienting (theme of Day 1)**

It is not easy to see or know where we are with ourselves, or with our organisations, or our projects. Things can happen and change all the time. It is also not easy to read the signs of what is happening in the world. We used the two maps described above to help guide us in this orienting. We listened to many different stories through the lenses of the eco-cycle phases; this gave us some framework to work with.

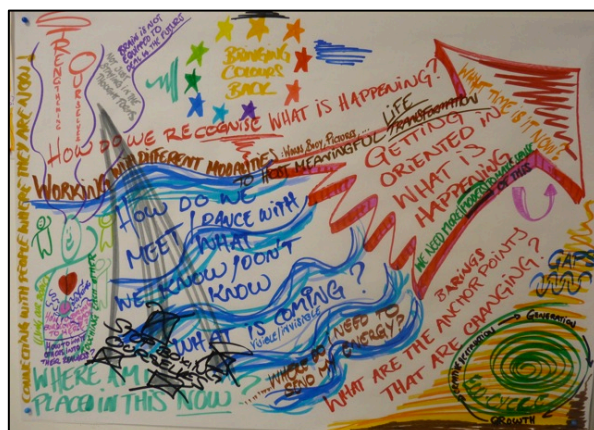
- **Connection (theme of Day 2)**

On day 2, our orienting process continued, more on the personal level, building on the shared understanding built on day 1. This immediately brought up the need for connection, which plays out on many levels:

- connection with myself
- with the context I live and work in
- with what is 'real' and what not
- with my challenge
- with the legacy (of the organisation, of Europe)
- with the story that is unfolding here

- **Unique place and unique contribution**

Even in such a relatively small gathering, we saw a full range of ambitions, from bringing participatory leadership to a meeting the following week, to changing the way the Commission plays its role in Europe and beyond. How do we support and honour these broader ambitions? Is it even justified to do so?



Working with participatory leadership brings something very personal – as practitioners we are confronted with our own inner dynamics. We are called to deepen our self knowledge to gain clarity about our own limits, about what we can and cannot handle.

In this respect, we saw a strong need for circles or **core teams**, to provide individuals with the support they need to be in the right position with their own personal ambition in this work of participatory leadership (not too big, not too small).

Questions that emerged that can help guide us in this inquiry:

- Where are my points of reference? What are my anchor points that allow me to be centred and resourceful?
- How do I come to a point of congruence in myself?
- How do I step out of my comfort zone and into the unknown?
- Where is my unique place? Where is my place in this, now?
- What am I good at in the eco-cycle, and does that fit with where my workplace is on the eco-cycle?

We saw the importance of 'niches' as protected spaces that can provide the time and space to sense deeper into this much needed interface between the individual and the collective.

- **Listening inside = listening outside - The personal is systemic**

We saw that as individuals we go through cycles of divergence and convergence, and through the phases of the eco-cycle, in the same way that the collective or organisation does. In the end, there is no separation.

Where I am blocked in myself, there I am blocked in what I can do in the organisation. Again, the best place to reveal and constructively work with these dynamics is in a healthy and dynamic core group.

## **THE BIGGER STORY**

A community of practice focuses on a domain – if one domain of the participatory leadership community is precisely its practice of participatory leadership, another which emerges inevitably each time is **the healing and 'wholing' of Europe**. It seemed as if the soul of Europa was with us during our time together, and some Open Space conversations and meaning-making sessions intertwined, to produce the following harvest for the reader's inspiration.





Even in the preparation of the gathering, during conference calls of the hosting team and the preparation the day before, an insight into the essence of the European Union was present. **The EU was created to keep warring parties at peace.** An unbroken thread runs through our shared history: a strong European tradition is the repression of chaos. Other peoples and continents ('beneficiaries' of our colonialism) are wild. But Europe's wildness is repressed. And this produces violence. The Union that we have today is the legacy of our wounds.

Can we build something new? Looking back through history, Europe's strength has sprung, time and again, from our collapse. United Europe came from the collapse of previous empires. Today, we stand again on the brink of collapse. If we are to build something authentically new, we need to look at our wounds. This we have not yet done, and this is who we are, and this is where our strength is. The gift is in the trauma.

What is Europe, really? It is *NOT* EU 2020 touted by our politicians: seeking to be best, first, a new empire – that's trying to be something we are not. Europe can be found in moments of contraction and dilation: the movement of the heart. We take things from elsewhere, the world over: our religion comes from the Middle East, our science from China and India... our gift is to take raw materials, transform them into something else and send it out into the world. Europe is an 'up-cycler'. We're not ground-level innovators. We take raw-materials/waste and do something with it.

We have learned from killing each other! And yet, how do we tell our stories? Stories like the mass starvation in Europe after World War 2, that are the true *raison d'être* of the common agricultural policy. Our stories should remind us of why we have done what we have, and why we are where we are today.

We don't love ourselves in old Europe. Deep down we have an inferiority complex that makes us seek to paper over the cracks. What would happen if we loved our wounds and our scars? They make us more who we are. We are wounded people and there is room for compassion. What if the European project was a still-point, a beating heart?

All civilisations have a life-cycle. Not for the first time, here in Europe we have arrived at the RELEASE phase, while this time it is Asia going UP. What is it that we need to release to make space for regeneration?

As for the European Commission, our organisation was built on the ashes of what our civilisation did to itself. Our patterns and structures were invented out of the wounds. And that is where we still stand, operating on the basic (and mostly unexamined) assumption that that is our mandate. We are still keeping old enemies apart. Keeping people safe... What needs to be released for us to recreate ourselves? Could it be time to start dealing with our deepest wounds?

How can we create spaces for Europe's traumas to be released, while part of our organisational culture is the avoidance of difficult conversations? History shows us that it tends to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation that can heal the wars. We have seen that the practice of participatory leadership allows us to have different conversations, where some pain can be spoken. This is no longer about 'therapy'. Now that we know how to have conversations in a different way, can we start to build the new structures, seeing what is the gift from our wounds?

An archetype that emerged in our conversations around Europe was Midas – the king who turned all he touched into gold. The economic model we have embraced in Europe holds true to that archetype. The monetisation of everything, tangible and intangible. Now it's killing us (we need only look at the growing trend of obesity amongst our children). Choosing prosperity as the ultimate goal will kill us. Vulnerability is needed to stay open and alive.

What does it mean to be a civilisation in decay? Having confidence in the future?

There are parts of Europe where the cracks are bigger, so the new can come through. The word 'crisis' in Greek means 'stance'. We need to decide and make a stand. But we are not yet an organism that can act as one. There are so many cultures in such a small land mass. What happens when you create wholeness about that, instead of fragmentation?

How can we learn from what is happening on the streets? That's where real life happens. So much innovation happening in Greece, but nobody knows about it. Instead we are seeing it as a problem to be fixed. How can we identify and connect with the niches of innovation throughout Europe, especially where the social experimentation is most intense?

There's a difference between Institutional Europe and the Europe of people's lives. How do we find out what's going on in Europe? Participatory leadership shows us that coming together doesn't have to mean standardisation. How can our practice of participatory leadership serve us in becoming an organism in Europe, rather than a world power?

Right now, our populations aren't convinced by the 'European dream' we are trying to sell them – we are in a bubble. We need to reach out to our populations – to hear them and learn from them. What is at the heart of the Commission's role in Europe? Is it policy-making? Making rules? Or is it convening and hosting

conversations across the full diversity of our beautiful continent that can allow Europe to become truly whole?

How can policy-making become a natural, living practice, as opposed to a procedure? How do we not lose the essence of what this work is? How do we avoid the pitfalls of institutionalisation, while building on the stability and resources it can offer?

**Who was there?**