

PRESENCING MASTERY AS A RELATIONAL AND ITERATIVE WAY OF KNOWING AND BEING

Beatriz Carrillo, Ph.D.

University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract: This article uses the case study of a social innovation hub formed as part of the u.lab MOOC at a Sino-British university, to outline the ways in which Theory U's integrative framework alongside the experiential learning and contemplative practices embedded in u.lab can be used to develop core capacities for presencing mastery. Presencing is understood here as a relational and iterative process that, when supported by epistemic and ontological shifts, guides the locus of presencing mastery to be informed by the pattern and quality of relationships, with one's inner knowing and among individuals in a group. The article positions Theory U as a holistic framework for individuals and groups to engage and integrate the cognitive, emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of theirs and the group's presencing. It identifies empathic listening, supported by awareness-based contemplative practices in u.lab, as key for developing relational and embodied forms of presencing mastery.

Keyword: Theory U, u.lab, relational capacities, presencing mastery

I. Introduction

It is wise in your own life to be able to recognize and acknowledge the key thresholds: to take your time; to feel all the varieties of presence that accrue there; to listen inwards with complete attention until you hear the inner voice calling you forward. The time has come to cross. From 'Thresholds' John O' Donohue (To Bless the Space Between Us, 2008)

In Theory U, Scharmer's (2016) theory of transformation, he describes presencing as a process and movement by which individuals and groups enter a deeper state of being of fundamental freedom and capacity to create. Arriving at and crossing this threshold, Scharmer tells us, cannot be achieved through conventional analytical knowledge, rather,

this process emerges out of a set of practices that act as leverage points to deepen our capacity to draw our action from a deeper source (Scharmer, 2016, p. 183). Presencing can thus be understood as an iterative and relational process, guided by practices that help individuals and groups explore the fundamental questions of Who is my Self? (authentic or higher Self) and What is my Work? (purpose, vocation, life's work), to allow for an awareness of future possibilities that would have otherwise not been available or conceivable. Core practices for cultivating presencing mastery can be linked to the development of both individual and group relational capacities that are supported by epistemic and ontological shifts toward and focus on the patterns and quality of relationships within a particular group or system.

Through the example of a social innovation hub formed as part of the u.lab MOOC at a Sino-British university, I argue that Theory U's integrative framework, supported by the u.lab experiential and contemplative curriculum and platform, provides an integrative holistic structure for individuals and groups to foster relational and embodied forms of presencing mastery. Theory U's systems-view perspective provides the conceptual framework for individuals and groups to engage with and integrate the cognitive, emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of theirs and the group's transformation (Pomeroy & Olivier, 2021, p. 72). This epistemological grounding, in turn, is supported by u.lab's experiential learning and contemplative practices, which serve as a form of scaffolding to develop and support different ways of being (ontological shift) necessary for cultivating presencing. Hence, I argue that while Theory U's conceptual framework emphasizes a shift in ways of knowing, the u.lab's embodied experiential learning process supports shifts in ways of being. Put differently, Theory U and u.lab can provide individuals with a body of knowledge and a set of tools to engage in the interrelated shifts in ways of knowing and being. Such iterative cognitive and felt/embodied experience, when understood, framed and applied experientially towards this ontological end, can help connect with the experience of presencing as a way of being, which is a core focus of Gunnlaugson's account of "presencing mastery" in the work of Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020, 2021).

Within this context, I identify empathic listening, supported by awareness-based practices such as journaling and mindfulness, as key practices for developing intersubjective capacities that support relational forms of presencing mastery. Crucial to engaging with and honing these practices is the development of a safe holding space – in this case the hub – where group members meet regularly to discuss Theory U principles, and to engage in generative dialogue around an individual's or a group challenge in small coaching circles. In

this way, individual and collective presencing capacities are supported, which can then be deployed in other contexts outside the hub. I thus argue that presencing mastery requires individual and groups to engage in an iterative “cycle of presencing” (Scharmer 2018, p. 31) to deepen awareness, inner knowing, and connection to what in Theory U is referred to as one’s highest future possibility or true work. Iteration is thus not only about repetition of certain practices, but about implementing those practices from newly gained worldviews and ways of being.

II. u.lab: supporting practice for developing capacity for presencing mastery

In Theory U’s U-shaped journey of transformation, presencing is a pre-condition to crystallising and co-creating emerging future possibilities arising from a new eco-awareness (up-ward trajectory of the U-journey). Arriving at the threshold of presencing at the bottom of the U involves shifting perception to enable the connection to our “real being” or true work or vocation (Scharmer, 2016, p. 161). This downward movement on the left side of the U entails a shift in the ways in which we attend, via opening of the mind (through curiosity), the heart (through empathy and compassion), and the will (through courage) (Scharmer, 2018, p. 28). Further, the aim here is to shift the place from which we operate and attend, we - as individuals and as groups - need to negotiate and overcome our internal voices of judgement, cynicism, and fear (Scharmer, 2018, p. 28).

As mentioned earlier, leverage points for deepening one’s capacity to operate from a deeper awareness and inner knowing are embedded in both individual and collective contemplative practices, supported by a safe and regular holding space. The u.lab curriculum and activities, including the hubs, also referred to as local communities of change, provide a scaffolding or “set-up” – such as coaching circles - for engaging in the regular enactment of those practices. Over fourteen weeks, u.lab participants are introduced to the Theory U framework and the U journey of transformation through videos, reading materials, and experiential learning exercises to apply various awareness-based practices, such as mindfulness, empathic listening and a daily journaling practice. Early in the course participants are introduced to Theory U’s levels of listening, and for the rest of the course, they are asked to do a short daily journaling exercise to reflect on how they listened to others in the interactions they had that day. Meanwhile, from the first hub meet-up, members commit to engage and listen to others from a place of non-judgement, with an open mind and open heart, seeking to give rise to a generative dialogue over the course of each session.

Because listening has a relational dimension to the practice, the way we listen to others is also shaped by the quality of the interactions and relationships of those engaged in dialogue. Consequently, developing a listening-awareness practice is prioritised to shift the place from which our actions stem, away from ignorance, hate and fear, toward engaging with others from a place of curiosity, empathy, and courage. At the hub sessions, the common intention and commitment to empathic listening allowed participants to feel safe to share without fear of being judged. The shift toward more empathic listening and trust building within the group was a gradual one, built over several fortnightly sessions.

This new awareness of how empathic listening can positively influence relationships (a cognitive shift), emerged alongside, and was supported by new ways of being (ontological shift) within the group. For example, such a shift was expressed by some participants as feeling more confident in themselves, an experience that seemed to emerge from a more empathic disposition towards themselves and others (negotiating their inner voices of judgement, fear and cynicism). Interactions within the safe space of the hub also created a new awareness of the embodied or felt quality of the transformation they were undergoing. This quality of “knowing through being,” (Gunnlaugson, 2023, p.14) became a way through which participants could gain a greater awareness of how a shift in ways of being can play a role in influencing the quality of relationships.

Participants spoke of bringing their newly gained listening awareness and disposition to everyday interactions and observing the qualitative change in those encounters, as well as in themselves. Empathy walks are one of the tools or practices that u.lab participants are encouraged to engage in, to develop empathic listening, and an awareness of how that listening influences the relationship with those they are engaging in. The empathy walk requires individuals to suspend judgement and “hold space” for someone who is very different from themselves, in order to establish a relationship across a significant boundary (u.school, n.d.). One participant, for example, shared about her decision to engage in an empathy walk with a stranger while on a trip overseas.

For me the empathy walk was probably the biggest challenge because I'm not a person who is really...how to say...open at first, I'm really bad at starting a conversation [laughter] with someone... I think this [new disposition] really helped me to get over myself, step out of the comfort zone and try to connect to someone. And I wouldn't have done that before.

When first formed, the hub also brought together a diverse group of strangers. Hub participants were from different cultural backgrounds and came from different parts of the university, and therefore most did not know each other before they joined u.lab and the hub.¹ One student, commented on the initial uncertainty over how to relate to others in the

¹ For a full outline of the hub composition and activities, as well as of the methodology used to gather and analyse the qualitative data in the case study see Carrillo 2023.

first few meetings: “...everyone is really different to engage with...how to say? Yeah, at first, I was not sure how to engage with everyone...” Later on, when asked to share about their overall experience in the hub, the same student mentioned:

I found it very different from all the other classes...at the core I think that also the atmosphere is very different from another classroom...I liked that we did this meditation in the beginning...a little bit like, hmmm...how did I feel? I felt like with people that are similar, very similar to me...or probably are there for the same reasons...And that made me feel comfortable, I would say...

This sense of common purpose or intention, built through mindfulness and empathic listening, helped hub participants feel more confident to share a personal experience, dilemma, or aspiration within their coaching circle. For some, the hub and coaching circles became a safe space where they could be vulnerable through their sharing, in a way that had not been possible in other contexts (Carrillo 2023, p. 526). In this way, the hub and coaching circles opened a space for personal exploration and in some cases, transformation, whereby hub members’ listening became “a holding space for bringing something new into reality that wants to be born” (Scharmer, 2018, pp. 27–28).

New self-awareness and insights about themselves gained through the dialogue and interactions in the hub gave participants a new sense of agency, as well as a more empathic disposition towards themselves and others. These shifts point to the felt or embodied dimensions of presencing, and to the transformative capacities of learning through doing and being. As examples of “letting be” (Gunnlaugson, 2023), these shifts would eventually help participants develop relational capacities - such as empathic listening and non-judgement - that could be deployed in conversations and interactions in other contexts. Empathic listening and sharing in the context of the safe space of the hub allowed participants to make an inner shift, helping them access their authentic self and the liminal space of presencing.

The shift in how they listened to others, supported by awareness-based practices, was identified by participants as one of the most important enablers of personal transformation, through its effect on the relationship to themselves and to others. In tandem, their newly gained disposition for empathic listening, helped them foster the relational capacities needed for authentic and inclusive collaboration and co-creation to emerge (Carrillo 2023, p. 516). As the course progressed, the quality of the interactions within the hub gave participants a glimpse into how interrelationships create reality (Buechner et al., 2020, p. 95). The epistemological and cognitive shift triggered by the engagement with the Theory U framework, was thus enhanced by the felt or embodied, emotional and relational dimensions that were explored in u.lab. In this sense, the development of relationality and deep connectedness can be seen as essential for bringing about transformative individual, organisational and societal/systems change.

III. The transformative capacity of Theory U's integrative framework

Nurturing the practice of empathic listening within the context of a safe space and supported by mindfulness and journaling practices speaks to the embodied potential of presencing when it is rooted in a relationality that “conveys a connection beyond the ego, capturing spiritual dimensions all humans share with deeper self, others, nature, and the universe” (Watson, 2002, p. 13). A shift toward such forms of relationality, however, requires critical self-reflection; a questioning of one's personal worldview, values, and ways of knowing. Hence, the more embodied and affective ontological forms of transformation that take place within the hub, need to also be supported by an episteme that enables individuals and groups to embrace different ways of knowing the world.

Those who are attracted to u.lab are usually drawn in by Theory U's holistic framework of transformation, which links personal and systemic transformation, going beyond a focus on cognitive or mental processes, to engage with the “emotional/relational, and spiritual dimensions of transformative change” (Pomeroy and Olivier, 2021, p. 72). Within the education sector, affective, and spiritual relationships have generally been kept out of the curriculum, while learning and knowing have tended to be separated from our senses and life worlds (Selby, 2002 cited in Lehner, 2022, p. 39). This has contributed to the fragmentation of students' views of themselves (Shahjanhan, 2005, p. 692), and to their sense of separation from others, from nature, and from the systems they are part of. Theory U provided a powerful systematic framework through which participants could interrogate what they knew and how they knew it, while u.lab tools and practices enabled participants to integrate that into their lives.

Hub participants mentioned being drawn to Theory U and u.lab's framework and platform, curious as to the links it made between personal growth and broader social change. One participant mentioned how much they appreciated having the space and opportunity to “recognise and find yourself”, while connecting with other people and the world (Carrillo, 2023, p. 10). Within u.lab, Theory U's systems-view perspective allowed participants to view and understand knowledge and reason as relational processes (Gergen, 2015; Lange, 2018). The shift in how they listen to others becomes the pathway through which this new relational understanding of the world also becomes a form of embodied knowledge through different ways of being. By attempting to engage the whole person - body, mind, emotion, spirit and will - Theory U can thus provide a foundation for a presencing type of cognition or “open knowing” to emerge (Scharmer, 2016, p. 165). In this way, Theory U explored in u.lab helped participants develop a relational form of

presencing mastery that can be understood and experienced as “knowing through being” (Gunnlaugson, 2023).

IV. Discussion and Conclusions

In the above analysis presencing was defined as an iterative and relational process through which individuals and groups can connect to and cultivate their inner wisdom and sense of future possibilities or purpose. Presencing can thus be characterised as both a “social technology” of freedom (Scharmer 2016) and as an instrument of personal, transpersonal and collective transformation (Gunnlaugson, 2021). Enabling and nurturing paths to presencing mastery is thus a worthwhile endeavour in the pursuit of more just and equitable futures. Here I argue that Theory U’s integrative framework, alongside the curriculum and infrastructure of the u.lab MOOC can provide practices through which more relational forms of presencing mastery can be developed, through the holistic and dialogical transformation of the individual and the collective. On the one hand, Theory U’s holistic framework provides individuals and groups with a framework to engage with and integrate cognition, emotion, relationality and spirituality to support theirs and the group’s transformation (Pomeroy & Olivier, 2021, p. 72). On the other hand, u.lab provides the scaffolding to develop and support individual and collective practices to cultivate presencing within a safe holding space.

Without intending to be a prescriptive formula, empathic listening, mindfulness, and journaling (to support listening awareness) were identified as core practices for deepening the capacity to operate from a deeper source or inner knowing. Empathic listening, in being informed by a relational onto-epistemology, was crucial for guiding the iterative “cycle of presencing,” in ways that led to encountering the possibilities for presencing as a felt, embodied experience. The hub or local community of change part of u.lab, provided a safe holding space for individuals to develop and hone their listening skills and relational capacities. Such a safe container was built on a commitment from its members to listen and relate from an open mind and open heart. Intentionality and a shift in perception hence become crucial qualities of a transformative holding space.

The transformative potential of Theory U and u.lab were mediated by the characteristics of the individuals and the group, and the heightened level of self-awareness within them. Theory U and u.lab are meant to engage individuals and groups in a journey of transformation, one which is not meant to conclude upon conclusion of the course. Cultivating presencing at an embodied level thus becomes a crucial element for fostering long lasting and evolving transformative processes. Additionally, practitioners can

complement the Theory U and u.lab frameworks with mastery approaches such as Gunnlaugson's Dynamic Presencing, which emphasise the need to cultivate embodied forms of presence based on "knowing through being," rather than a presencing based in awareness-based forms of making a cognitive shift. Among other aspects, cultivating the relational and embodied dimensions of presencing are critical to any path of mastery. The path towards presencing mastery, consequently, depends in part on contexts of quality relationships (to inner knowing and to others) and safe spaces, where individuals and collectives can sense and actualise emerging future possibilities with potential to disrupt the status quo.

V. References

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BEATRIZ CARRILLO, Ph.D. is senior lecturer in the Discipline of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Sydney (Australia). Her broad research interest is in social justice, social change, and transformative leadership and learning. One of her research streams has been on social change in contemporary China, through a focus on social inclusion/exclusion and welfare policy. Her other research stream has focused on Theory U as a framework that supports transformative learning, pro-social behaviour and systemic social change. Her more recent publications on this topic include 'Embedding Theory U and awareness-based practices within Higher Education' (co-authored with V. Rodriguez Carreon) published in *Advances in Presencing Volume III: Collective Approaches in Theory U* (Gunnlaugson & Brendel 2021) and 'Conceptualizing and Enabling Transformative Learning Through Relational Onto-Epistemology: Theory U and the u.lab Experience' (Carrillo 2023) published in the *Journal of Transformative Education*.

email contact: Beatriz.carrilloagarcia@sydney.edu.au