Chapter 13
Applying Theory U: The Case of the Creative Living Lab

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the results of a qualitative case study where Scharmer’s Theory U (Scharmer, 2007a) was applied to Creative Living Lab (CreaLab), an interdisciplinary program at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. This chapter discusses and explains why and how Theory U, the Living Lab approach, and systemic action research are applied at CreaLab. The chapter contributes an empirical case for the application of Theory U. It addresses two important research gaps: First, the above-mentioned methodological approaches and Theory U are so far not together in a theoretical framework; second, there are so far no conceptual guidelines that would instruct the reflective application of such a theoretical framework in practice, for example in educational environments aimed at addressing and evolving the mostly hidden “mindsets” and “wills” of participants and at developing innovative capacity.

INTRODUCTION

Theory U describes the process of bringing something new into the world as a generic U-shaped process starting with different levels of perception and moving through generative, presencing and prototyping processes (Scharmer, 2007a). Although Theory U offers a generic methodology that can be used to design and apply the U-process in teams, case studies describing how this methodology is applied in practice in environments for interdisciplinary learning and creating are scarce. This chapter presents and reflects on the case of the Creative Living Lab (CreaLab), an
interdisciplinary program at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts aimed at improving the innovative capacity of the higher education system and university partners. By partners we are referring to the internal actors aligned with the university (e.g. full-time professors, tutors, researchers, students, administrative personnel, etc.) and actors who only occasionally cooperate with the university (e.g. executive students, research partners from companies, public bodies, funding sponsors, etc.).

Within CreaLab, members of the university’s five departments (Design & Art, Music, Social Work, Business, and Technology & Architecture) as well as external partners collaborate together. The vision of CreaLab is to contribute to a world in which educational institutions support their members and partners in systematically uncovering what they deeply care about as individuals, teams, and organizations (i.e., what they envision as really valuable to them and to the world). CreaLab enables them to discover how they can use their potential and contribute, through their collaboration with others, to the realization of important aspects of their shared vision. CreaLab assists university members and partners in learning to become authors or entrepreneurs of their own life scripts.

This is an unorthodox undertaking and requires a high level of emotional energy. It asks for truly trans-disciplinary collaboration, for a participative way of developing the program itself, the content, the collaboration network and the “Creacology” as an environment for learning and creating. Accordingly, the conception, implementation, and development of CreaLab (and its activities) do not easily align with any ‘classic’ (in the sense of positivistic) project management approach. Therefore, CreaLab builds its methodology on two practice-based research approaches to translate Theory U into an adequate learning environment: The Living Lab approach and systemic action research.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

Theory U comprises both a theoretical perspective and a practical social technology (Scharmer, 2007a). As a theoretical perspective, the theory suggests that how a situation emerges is strongly influenced by the way an individual interprets and understands it. As a practical social technology, Theory U offers a set of principles and practices arranged around a U-shape. These are designed for collectively creating the future that wants to emerge when moving from co-initiating via co-sensing, co-inspiring, and co-creating to co-evolving. Therefore, Theory U is being used as an explicit conceptual framework for this study.

Individuals and groups who move through the U connect to their authentic selves. Moving down the left side of the U guides to presencing, a blend of the words ‘presence’ and ‘sensing’ (Scharmer, 2007a) that refers to the ability to sense and bring one’s highest future potential into the present. During the course of moving down and up the U, individuals and groups can experience the opening of minds, hearts, and wills. Since the CreaLab team was working with diverse dialogue techniques and innovation methods beforehand, it was observable that those methods weren’t sufficient to enable profound change. What the other approaches were lacking was an overall methodology and constructivist understanding of how innovation could be understood from a future perspective. Theory U instils such perspective and is successfully applied in a variety of contexts to address that kind of challenges (as mentioned in Scharmer, 2007a and can be taken from www.presencing.org). Additionally, several CreaLab team members worked with the Theory U method itself or had observed and studied applied cases and came to the conclusion that Theory U would provide CreaLab with the best framework to work with.

Apart from the conceptual grounding in Theory U, CreaLab is based upon and makes use of two