

Chapter 8

The Gift of Presence in Groups: An Unfolding Story of Transformative Learning

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Abstract

In this chapter we describe our journey of discovery into the transformative nature of *presence* in groups. The authors' recognition of the power of presence occurred while working with a variety of groups both as facilitators and leaders of facilitator training programmes. Examples of accessing presence in workplace and other settings are also explored within Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia. In the process of holding, developing and passing on this knowledge, a group of peers formed themselves into the organisation Zenergy. Over 25 years a body of knowledge emerged regarding group facilitation and this was synthesised into five books and a diploma of facilitation. The books carried this facilitation knowledge into various parts of the world, including the USA, UK and Europe, with the books being translated into Chinese, Korean and Spanish. Participation in face-to-face and online experiences has involved 3000 people.

Forms of transformative knowledge relating to presence in groups have been noted in many indigenous and healing traditions and are beginning to be recognised within mainstream education. Thought leaders involved in developing this body of knowledge include Betty Flowers, Joseph Jaworski, Otto Scharmer, Peter Senge and Tom Malone.

There is a rising interest in the potency of presence as the sharing society grows and is enabled by a plethora of new communication technologies. Mainstream higher education is becoming involved. This chapter is one expression of the growing interest in the transformative potential of presence and collective intelligence in groups.

Our approach to the topic is through describing the nature of presence, how and when it occurs in groups, and the connection with social ecology and transformative learning. This chapter is for all those interested in transformational learning and transformational workplaces, and those who want to create breakthroughs in group and team performance.

Introduction

Our universe is unfolding as a connected, networked and fully inter-dependent whole. This unfolding is holonomic, multi-layered and transcending time and space. Within this whole, in our world, the root systems of forests, the whole of human endeavour and the connectivity of the internet have much in common, as is recognised in the evolving discipline of social ecology.

Within this context, the threads we explore focus on a vital aspect of high-functioning groups and teams: that of being fully connected, 'in the zone', accessing presence. Presencing can

potentially become an integral part of transformative learning. Here we offer illustrative stories within which we are finding the words to describe *presence*, how and when *presence* occurs in groups, and how *presence* contributes to transformative learning.

What is this thing called presence?

A group of people coming together in a state of *presence* generates a collective energy field of great intensity. It not only raises the degree of *presence* of each member of the group but also helps to free the collective human consciousness from its current state of mind dominance. This will make the state of *presence* increasingly more accessible to individuals (Tolle, 2004, p. 106).

Light from the entirety of the nighttime sky is present in every space – no matter how small. This is exactly the same phenomenon evident in a hologram. The three-dimensional image created by interacting laser beams can be cut in half indefinitely, and each piece, no matter how small, will still contain the entire image. This reveals what is perhaps the most mysterious aspect of parts and wholes: as physicist Henri Bortoft says, ‘Everything is in everything (1996)’. When we eventually grasp the wholeness of nature, it can be shocking. In nature, as Bortoft puts it, ‘the part is a place for the presencing of the whole. This is the awareness that is stolen from us when we accept the machine worldview of wholes assembled from replaceable parts (1996)’ (Flowers, et al., 2005, p. 5).

Deeper levels of learning create increasing awareness of the larger whole – both as it is and as it is evolving – that leads to actions that increasingly serve the emerging whole (Flowers, et al., 2005, p. 9).

Presence is conscious awareness. Collective *presence* and co-creation have been brought into the academic world through the work of Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In *Theory U* (2009) Scharmer explains that:

[Collective *presence* and co-creation] are empirically the rarest (generative forms of communication) and the most strategically important. That infrastructure, if in place, would allow whole eco systems to connect and cope better, faster and more innovatively with the key challenges at hand. The lack of that infrastructure represents a missing piece of societal hardwiring today (pp. 337–338).

How and when does presence occur in groups?

Presence occurs naturally in focused and harmonious groups. *Presence* is sometimes called synergy, or group consciousness, and it is a form of collective intelligence. However, it is not collective intelligence associated only with the rational mind, though it may include this (see Woolley, et al., 2015). Groups imbued with *presence* experience a vibrant field of aliveness, and each unique group will give this consciousness its own flavour, qualities and vibration. From sustained *presence*, unexpected and creative leaps and insights can emerge.

A conscious group will exhibit observable individual awareness, and individual and group *presence*. Consciousness grows where there is alignment, awareness and openness to more possibility. When a conscious group aligns sincerely on a purpose that is in keeping with the greater good of all, there is more energy available to the group. The group can become informed by a subtle energy that is greater than that usually available to individuals in the group. The form of this collective energy varies, and the strength of the energy seems to be related to the ability of the individuals in the group to generate *presence* and to the creation of a clear and aligned group purpose (and subsequently to effective action). The enhanced energy field of a group with an aligned group purpose can enable the individuals in it to raise their own individual vibration to meet that of the group. A group working consciously in this way attracts more consciousness to itself in the form of energy and information stored in the wider consciousness, called ‘Akasha’ or the ‘Akashic Field’ by Hungarian philosopher Ervin Lazlo (2004).

When this greater energy is consciously embraced and harmonised within a group, the group potential becomes more than the sum of the individuals within it. Irritations that may have previously been in the way fall into the background and are no longer as important or as relevant as they may have been. A noticeable shift occurs, from the constraints of individual ego into a fresh perspective and wider context of collective intelligence and then to a ‘higher self’.

This effect has been described as synergy, flow or being ‘in the zone’. The group becomes empowered or ‘powered up’ and can work with the subtle energy of emergence.

In *The Art of Facilitation* (2007), Dale Hunter and co-authors explore how “dialogue in a space of deep listening opens up access to the whole field of consciousness, sometimes called the fourth dimension, and the unlimited knowledge available beyond the constraints of time and space” (p. 98).

In his book *The Living Classroom: Teaching and Collective Consciousness* Christopher M. Bache (2008) explores ‘learning fields’ created between the teacher and class in his work as a university teacher. He uses the expression ‘collective abilities’ in a similar way to our use of the term collective intelligence.

When people open themselves to each other and focus intensely on a common goal, their individual energies become synchronized in a way that can mediate contact with levels of intelligence and creativity that are beyond the reach of these same individuals acting alone. We must engage each other in an integrated manner for this more potent mode of knowing to emerge. The specific level of consciousness that is accessed is not as important here as the discovery of (... the enhanced capacity of the integrated group mind itself) ... Whatever our individual abilities, our collective abilities are greater (Bache, 2008, p. 68).

Relationship with social ecology

Social ecology is the study of the relationships between people and their environments, including the interdependence of individuals, collectives and institutions (Jenness, 2013). Social ecology recognises that nature is alive and connected. Humans are as much a part of nature (living things) as any other species: bees, trees, whales and all living cells. If we think and act as being separate from nature and from one another we lose our access to the *presence* that this connectedness brings. Awareness of the living reality of nature requires us to be in our bodies, as this essence cannot be accessed through intellect alone. All our senses and capacities are required to engage in direct experience.

Contemporary academia, with its diverse ways of learning, still embodies belief systems that are unsupportive of full human inter-connection with the total living environment. This situation has its roots in the Renaissance, when a separation developed between religion and science as a practical way of allowing science to develop without the oppressive hierarchical control of the church. The illusion of pure objectivity, and the notion that scientifically provable forms of truth can be disconnected from the whole of living experience, is still dominant in parts of mainstream academia. This type of thinking does not allow for, or give credence to, diverse ways of knowing, including the direct experience of consciousness itself. Yet flashes of insight by our greatest mathematicians and scientists suggest moments of direct experience of unlimited consciousness.

As Stuart Hill wrote, “Social ecology brings together so many poles that rarely meet: the arts and sciences; critical thinking, reflexivity, passion and intuition; rationality and spirituality; the stories of the ancients, systems theory and chaos theory; plus, an extensive list of disciplines. Our social ecology is a transdisciplinary meta-field that has been particularly informed by ecology, psychology and health studies, sociology and cultural studies, the creative arts, holistic sciences, appropriate technology, post-structuralism and critical theory, ecofeminism, eco-politics, ecological economics, peace and futures studies, applied philosophy and ‘spirituality’ (in its broadest sense)” (Hill, 2011, p. 18).

Presence fits into the broadest sense of spirituality. We prefer not to use that term though, as it might suggest to some that it belongs in some way to organised religion. It doesn't.

The transformative learning context

Although there are many educational theories that focus on the learner as an individual in a process of knowledge discovery (see Bengtson, 2014; Bridges, 2017; and Moore, 2012), the group facilitation learning and facilitator education of Zenergy¹ can be located at a co-creation end or edge of transformative learning theory.

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990; 1991; 1994; 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2010) has, over the last few decades, remained true to its original construction. The theory has been described as constructivist, and “an orientation which holds that the way learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experience is, central to making meaning and hence learning.” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 222). The theory involves two kinds of learning: *instrumental*

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learning and *communicative learning*. Whereas instrumental learning focuses on “learning through task-oriented problem solving and determination of cause and effect relationships” (Taylor, 1998, p. 5), communicative learning focuses on how others communicate their feelings, needs and desires with others. Awareness of transformative learning theory helps learners become more critical, autonomous and responsible thinkers (Mezirow, 2000). It has commonalities with other theories of adult learning, including andragogy (Knowles, 1984), experiential learning (Rogers, 1969), and with Cross’s Characteristics of Adults as Learners model (1981). In addition to these is an emerging third learning dimension: a *presence* and an awareness of collective intelligence providing access to seemingly limitless energy and knowledge.

This intangible quality of *presence* has been described by those who have recognised and valued this quality of being as essence, awareness, wairua², the elixir, consciousness, mana, healing, love, Gaia, and the inter-connectedness of all things. Collective *presencing* is a transformative gateway through which holistic insights and creative solutions may emerge to address issues such as climate change, best use of scarce resources, wellbeing and equity. *Presencing* transcends traditional ways of thinking and acting and has the potential to enhance educational learning at all levels.

The Zenergy experience and transformative learning approach

Founded in 1993, Zenergy is a small globally active New Zealand-based facilitation company working towards the vision of ‘Whole people co-operating in a sustainable world’. Zenergy runs training programmes with groups of people and works with organisations in designing and facilitating leading-edge group work practices.

Zenergy focusses on the role, skills and potential of the neutral or impartial group facilitator (International Association of Facilitators, 2004) who guides process and does not become involved in content. We envisaged the skills of group facilitation being made available globally to all levels of society, particularly to those who are disadvantaged and open to empowerment (Friere, 1972).

Together, we explored co-operative ways of working and began working both as group facilitators and facilitator trainers. Our training programmes for group facilitators are usually held over four or five days. They are highly interactive and holistic, and include movement, music, interactive processes, side-by-side coaching and deep sharing.

Over time the leaders experienced many occasions in which the groups facilitated made unexpected leaps and generated transformative group experiences. Reflection on these experiences led us to explore synergy, *presence* and collective intelligence. As a result, we developed a passion for understanding and helping provide access to group *presence* and synergy.

Essence story

In ‘The Essence of Facilitation’ (Hunter, et al., 1999), one of the five-day Stage 2 facilitator training group experiences is described:

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This was a wider network of facilitators five-day group training involving 17 people in March 1996. Different group members experienced a whole range of expanded awareness. The shift that occurred was from a group of separate individual identities into that of expanded individual awareness and group consciousness. Most of the people who took part in this experience have continued to experience a high level of connection and synchronicity since that time.” Many of the participants have remained in connection with one another (till now) and are involved in life enhancing work. (p.111)

An interesting aspect of this *presencing* experience was that on the third or fourth day we forgot to have morning tea and lunch, and only became aware of this at about 3.00pm.

Over time, a body of knowledge developed, which was synthesised into five books and a modular Diploma of Facilitation, including an online module for a time. Participation in face-to-face and online learning experiences included more than 2500 people, in several hundred small group intensives and numerous interactive sessions at facilitator conferences in many countries around the world. Online facilitator training was part of this.

In addition, the availability of the Zenergy books through amazon.com help spread this group facilitation knowledge to the USA, Europe, Asia and Australasia. There have also been translations for China, Korea and Spanish-speaking countries.

The Zenergy approach focuses on enabling groups to improve their understanding of group dynamics, to establish an aligned group purpose and to develop a shared culture for working together and supporting whole personhood (Hunter, 1994; 1997; 1999; 2007). At a group level, this approach regards the learner as an individual within a wider field of collective intelligence. Thus, it extends transformative learning theory beyond that of individual learning to group learning. Through a dynamically facilitated process, learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experiences within a collective group context.

Elite sports

Presencing is a natural phenomenon that can be found in many groups and teams, including elite sports. In a *New Zealand Herald* article by Chris Rattue following a rugby game, All Black member Beaudon Barret refers to what we call *presence* as ‘being in the zone’.

“We’re aware that teams typically drop off, especially at the end of the first half,” Barret said. “It’s hard to keep that intensity right up there. Naturally you fatigue, and so we challenge ourselves to just work that little bit harder to keep the ball alive. It worked tonight and it worked last week. It comes down to work rate and believing.”

Barret continues:

“When you’re thought-free you’re out there in the moment, just doing it. That’s when I’m at my best as an athlete and it’s probably the same for everyone else. You’re just in the zone ... you’re executing, you’re all connected. You’re all on the same level.

The challenge as an athlete is how do you get there at the start of a game as often as you can.” (Rattue, 2018, August 26)

Gaining access

Presencing is described in various ways, including awareness, consciousness, spaciousness, inner stillness, connection to the whole, to the divine, ‘all of it’, being awake, in the flow, in the zone and synergy. *Presence* often occurs spontaneously as part of in-depth involvement with activities such as music, dance, movement, sport and being in nature. It can also be accessed through spiritual practices, including prayer, meditation and Buddhist-based ‘mindfulness’.

But for those who do not know *presence*, and are not involved in the above activities, where can they experience it and learn how to access it? And for the many who struggle with being in the world, and perhaps suffer from depression, this access could be crucial to finding well-being.

An important way to access *presence* and grow this capacity is to notice when it is present in a group. For many, it is a lot easier to notice *presence* with others than on one’s own. This is because a group can act as an amplifier of *presence*. Being in nature and experiencing ‘awe’ can have a similar effect. So being in a group, and in nature, is even better.

The need for a safe container

The provision of a safe ‘container’ is important for groups working effectively and accessing *presence*. In our practice as facilitators we have found that the setting of an aligned group purpose and agreeing on a group culture (how we want to be together), sometimes known as ‘ground rules’, is very important in creating safety. Purpose and culture provide a safe container for *presence*, consciousness and collective intelligence to emerge.

As a process it is important to allow participants to first become aware of and connected energetically with their physical body, to connect their energy with the earth and then to tune in with others around them and then beyond the room to the wider environment. This energetic connection can be also extended out to a planetary and cosmic level that is free of time and space. Then notice what emerges.

Here are some pointers to accessing *presence*. Adapt them to your own needs.

- Notice your breath moving.
- Feel into your whole body (perhaps starting with the hands).
- Feel your feet connect with the floor or ground.
- Allow energy and awareness to flow into the earth.
- Become centred in your body.
- Become aware of the whole room and beyond, including the natural environment.
- Notice everything that comes to you – thoughts, feelings, sensations – and let them fall away as you breathe out.
- Notice and be with the others in the room – listen deeply.

- Together ‘hold the space’ for meeting the purpose of the group.
- Allow for emergence – speech, movement, images, colours, surprises or whatever shows up.
- If the energy feels a little heavy, it is helpful for the facilitator to maintain a degree of lightness and spaciousness – ‘like a feather on water’.

Kāren’s story

Here is an example from musician and facilitator Kāren Hunter:

I was invited as a facilitator onto the team of a Transformational Festival for its final New Year event after a 24-year run as a central pillar of a nation-wide community. The festival catered for between 1500-2000 at each New Year’s event, and I had noticed that in the aftermath of each event there was a high ratio of dissatisfaction between crew members. It had a tendency to become a ‘toxic’ stressed working environment, which was the antithesis of what I expected. I didn’t understand how the group could give so much joy to the community and yet come away themselves feeling completely drained.

I told the group I was only interested in taking the role if a few members of the team could attend a Zenergy Stage One training programme and get some training to support me. Two key women took it on.

Once they had completed the training, and there were now three of us who understood some basic processes and tools; we introduced the concept to the rest of the core crew, and we worked with them to create a Purpose and Culture for the festival to guide the final event. The group chose as the Purpose: *To nourish energetic sustainability*. This was in essence a group in crisis, and the purpose reflected the need to survive the final event! The Culture items were:

- Trust
- Compassion
- Honouring
- Team spirit
- Communication
- Self responsibility
- CELEBRATE!!!

Every festival involves high energy, problem solving, urgent communication and ‘number eight wire’ mentality (a phrase used to describe a stereo-typical mentality of New Zealanders referring to their creativity and the ingenuity). By being grounded and present to our purpose and culture, the team emerged from the event tired, but able to hold themselves and each other with respect and tenderness. Festival participants had commented on the abundant ‘nourishing energy’ within the crew, and although there were inevitable bumps and bruises the over-all mood was upbeat and positive.

Sustainable co-operative processes in organisations

As part of my (Dale) PhD research in the Social Ecology Research Group (SERG) between 2000–03, supervised by Emeritus Professor Stuart Hill, I facilitated a co-operative inquiry into *sustainable co-operative processes in organisations* (Hunter, 2003) which we had termed ‘co-operacy’ (Hunter et al., 1997). Eleven people (most of whom were facilitators) took part over a number of weeks in this project, which involved individual research and four interspersed full-day meetings of the research group. On the last full-day session, the research group realised that co-operacy was not only about bringing about structural and process change in organisations (doing things differently). We had a transformative experience as a group in which we realised that – for co-operative processes to be sustainable – each of us needed to transform ourselves into fully embodied ‘whole persons’ imbued with love and compassion. This insight emerged during a sustained period of several hours in which we were *presencing* together (Hunter, 2003).

The occasional spontaneous appearance and experience of *presence* in groups created a desire to learn how to generate this ‘power’ consciously in groups as a facilitator. This journey of discovery has led to much learning about the nature of *presence* and its potential to transform or ‘supercharge’ intentional groups into potent forces for good.

As a group participant, I found that the strong experience of *presence* generated within an aligned group, dimmed or disappeared after a group ended and I returned to ‘normal’. To have more access, I learnt to recreate *presence* by myself, and did this through various techniques including writing a journal, going to the gym, practicing yoga, meditation, and using breathing techniques. Eckhart Tolle’s videos helped me through pointers such as ‘saying yes to every moment’, awareness between thoughts and spaciousness.

Presence works online too

Online facilitator training has also been a part of Zenergy’s exploration, as we recognised the potential for generating collective intelligence in groups using emerging online group tools and technologies. Drawing on their face-to-face facilitation training programmes, Zenergy launched its first Online Facilitation Skills programme in 2006. The programme explored facilitation in online groups using text, audio, video conferencing and 3D software tools. As an inquiry, we wondered whether it was even possible to facilitate and create an environment for generating collective intelligence in online group settings, given the lack of ‘embodiment’ (Hunter, 2003). Without loops of communication feedback, body language cues and verbal tone, there was a curiosity to uncover whether a facilitator could effectively create a safe container, build relationships and facilitate transformative group experiences as effectively online (Thorpe, 2011). Despite the various challenges of geography, different time zones and technology-mediated communication, we found that it was possible to take an online group to similar depths of connection and engagement as had been experienced in face-to-face facilitated groups, and that transformative group experiences were possible.

Another clear outcome was the development of a set of 26 online facilitator competencies, grouped into seven categories (Thorpe, 2016). Along with capabilities in group process and competence with online software tools, we recognised the need to ‘communicate with *presence* online’. This important competence was articulated as the ability to facilitate online

groups at a deeply creative and generative level. It involved the facilitator having the ability to *presence* self and others separated by time and distance, while being sensitive to cultural differences. “The facilitator was expected to hold and support a group through deep listening and careful communication, assisting the group through their interventions to harness their collective intelligence and achieve their best performance” (Thorpe, 2016, p.84).

Rick’s story

Facilitators trained in Zenergy methods took their knowledge and skills back to their own workplaces. One Zenergy-trained facilitator and master electrician, Rick Sommerford, worked for a number of years (2014–2017) on the development of a large \$US37 billion Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) construction project near Darwin (Australia). Rick was leading a team of 55 electricians and trade assistants, initially employed on night shift to lay the cabling for the project. Safety and productivity were important issues.

Each shift began with a briefing meeting called ‘prestart’. The purpose was to inform the team of specific tasks for the night, raise safety issues and build relationships within the team. Rick and his colleague, Scotty Baker, led these meetings. Rick regarded the opportunity to build relationships within the team as a way of increasing safety and productivity. He introduced a group process into this meeting in which one of the team (a different person at each shift) was invited to share something about themselves unknown to his or her co-workers. Interesting and personal information was shared: at times amusing, at times poignant and deeply felt. As the project continued over eight months, this sharing became an important part of the meeting and it led to a deepening of relationships and a strengthened sense of team work. They also trialled group awareness games to focus the team on each other and their interconnectedness, and on how different mindsets can influence the group dynamic.

Rick says, “at times the sense of *presence* was palpable. Productivity increased beyond what is normally associated with nightshift. For example, a 0.8 efficiency rate for nightshift is accepted as a good result for equitable dayshift activities. On many occasions the night shift team achieved efficiency rates equal to 1.2 efficiency of that achieved on dayshift. This is extremely rare in the industry.”

There were comments around being “in the zone tonight” or “wow, how did that happen” and “a knowing in the group, that something special had happened, that something I had come to know as *presence* through Zenergy had been there that night.” Team social events occurred spontaneously. At the end of a Saturday night shift with a night off on Sunday, the girls and boys would head off to party a little and enjoy the fruits of their teamwork.

This way of experiencing *presence* in a team environment was the most satisfying experience at work that many of the group had experienced, including Rick and Scotty.

Zenergy leaders’ meeting

The work is continuing. At the latest 5-day retreat, attended by seven leaders, the following experience was noted:

The purpose of the retreat was ‘To refresh and refocus the work of Zenergy in the world’. On the fourth day, the energy appeared to rise up in the centre of the group like a ‘spout’. The energy felt so strong that we found ourselves standing up and moving further apart. We shared our impressions and thoughts as we ‘held’ the energy. When the energy subsided after an hour or so, we drew a picture jointly of a whale emerging from spouting water. This was the closest we could come to representing our experience. The experience had the effect of enlivening and energising us to move into the next phase of development as a self-motivating collective.

Conclusion

The ability to generate *presence* is part of developing effective groups. However, it cannot be imposed or forced. It is a natural phenomenon that surfaces when a group is aligned, has a clear and life-enhancing purpose, a supportive group culture, and the commitment to do the work. *Presence* and conscious awareness in groups is a ‘super power’ that is gradually being recognised, accessed and named (although not always with the same name). *Presence* works beyond time and space, and can lead to unexpected and, at times, remarkable outcomes and actions for the common good. *Presencing* can become a highly valued part of cooperative transformative learning.

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Notes

¹ <https://zenergyglobal.com/>

² Wairua is a Māori word that may be translated as 'spirit'; a more extensive definition is provided at <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?&keywords=wairua>