



Collaborative circles as social movement

- Hacking oldskool organizing principles –

Sponsored by TAG, Taos Institute grant
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Who are we?

Rudy Vandamme (1958) is a Ph.D. in social psychology. Rudy has written a number of coaching handbooks for professionals, based on social constructionism (Ken Gergen's writings are referenced in all of his books). **Ann Sterckx** (1973) is a Master in Organizational Psychology, a Master in Human Resources, certified facilitator of World Café and trainer in Art of Hosting. We work within organizations as consultants and coaches. Together we wrote '*Blessed by nature*', an existential novel in which world citizenship is brought in contrast with nature.

This TAG project runs parallel to our voluntary work in the areas of citizenship, activism, transition towns, ecology, and environmental issues. As citizens we see ourselves as activist psychologists involved in social change.

Introduction: the challenge

Wherever people are in the world, the US, Australia or Europe, they can no longer hide from all the influences from the outside world (terrorism, refugees, climate change, consumerism, financial breakdown, discrimination, burn-out through alienating conditions in the workplace, and so on). The feeling of insecurity is overwhelming. Increased stress is a threat and can lead to fundamentalist responses or withdrawal from civic responsibilities, seeking refuge in individualism and consumerism. The present state of affairs appears to show that human civilization is liable to collapse into chaotic tribe cultures: "we versus them". Society can move into a direction that is diametrically opposed to what social constructionism aims for.

In-depth dialogues among citizens about political, economic, and environmental issues are rare. Citizens, in general, don't know how to have a meaningful dialogue or a deep conversation with others in a social constructionist way (open-minded, empathic, sharing differences, genuine curiosity, creating open space...). The conversational patterns on which a social constructionist relational practice is based, are not part of common wisdom.



Our expertise



In our professional work as organizational consultants we work with a social constructionist-based relational practice to enhance team conversations. We are used to facilitating teams by helping them to express ideas individually, to accept differences and to create knowledge and reach decisions that are helpful to the organization. The practice we use is called 'Ontwikkelcirkel', literally 'development circle'. 'Developmental' means: let's connect with each other, let's dialogue, and move forward together. We use the English term 'collaborative circles'.

This relational practice can be used as a method or step by step ritual. It is a ritualized application of a number of social constructionist ideas. It comprises the following features:

1. A gathering of people in a particular locality (neighborhood, network, workplace);
2. A setting consisting of a circle without tables in which each participant feels relaxed and comfortable;
3. Theme-centered conversations (societal or environmental themes);
4. The presence of a layered exploration: each participant is given a voice, attention is paid to team identity development, the meaningful participation in bigger wholes is explored.
5. Embracing differences: different opinions, social class, gender, lifestyle...
6. Eventually, one or more action projects might emerge or conclusions may be drawn.

These features are brought together in a seven-step process that ritualizes the event.

Home circles

Prior to the TAG project, in 2015, we had been experimenting with our collaborative circle conversations at home ('home circles'), and the results were astonishing. With only a little practice people started sharing their fears and worries, reflecting on their lifestyles and reaching new forms of understanding about societal and environmental issues. It encourages them to enhance their relational responsibility and resilience in positioning themselves in the world. They also talk about a deeper sense of belonging and feel an engagement to contribute to a better world. The collaborative circle conversations (home circles) open up space for alternatives and different perspectives.



Our dream

From this experience, we formulated a dream: can we accelerate this method in all kinds of contexts? Can we start a social movement in which people use collaborative circles as a method to build a new community spirit, appreciate the sense of belonging and ownership? We support the idea that social constructionism can be an answer to a political issue in which polarization and radicalization threaten dialogue and democracy. The prerequisite, in our opinion, is that social constructionism is willing to design a set of practices that can be multiplied on a big scale and in a wide range of applications.

The TAG grant and the action research project would be of great assistance to us in realizing our dream of starting a social movement, for the sake of humanity and preserving our Earth. The project itself is a case study of how we apply social constructionism to citizenship.

Objectives:

1.To create a social movement in which collaborative circles are a way to enhance resilience in relation to societal, political, economic and environmental issues.

2.To discover design practices to accelerate the distribution of social constructionist-based methods.

We intend to use the grant to establish the necessary groundwork for a social movement. The grant helps us financially in hiring training rooms and meeting places, catering, travel expenses, and website building. We see our facilitation work as a voluntary contribution.

Epic failure: five attempts to connect with existing movements

In the first half of 2016 we were firmly convinced instead of starting from scratch, it would be better to connect with existing communities in our home town of Ghent in Belgium. After all, these communities were already involved in social change, citizenship and activism. We connected with five different existing practices. In all five attempts we connected first with the group leader. We explained our dream. We proposed to show our collaborative method by applying it directly in a meeting within their community. Which all of them accepted as a good idea.



Over the course of 2016, we had to conclude that all five attempts had started in a promising way but ended in an abrupt lack of interest. We were having a hard time reflecting on what went wrong, because it is our attitude to offer ourselves, to contribute a different element to the existing way of working. We presented ourselves in a modest way, serving the higher cause of their work.

The first community we approached, called 'Schakel' ('Connection'), is a Ghent-based initiative of local people who aim to accelerate the co-creation between citizens and local government. We first joined a meeting and then proposed to facilitate with our seven-step conversation. We did it twice. Although the energy was quite high and the results were promising, the person in charge of the meeting showed a huge lack of leadership. He didn't frame the ongoing dialogues. He tended to leave everything open, following the idea of co-creation and emergence. But the lack of choose one framework gave people the impression that the meeting was going in all directions. Only a few insiders showed up at the next meeting.

The second community, 'Change Think Positive', is a large group of small-scale entrepreneurs who are linking their businesses to environmentally friendly products and services. The community of about forty people is connected through a magazine and a paid membership. We proposed to the leader of the meeting that we would take on the role of facilitators in order to increase our connection with the members and to discover the higher mission of the community. At the close of the meeting it became clear that there were some underlying organizational issues between many of the members and the chairperson. She was not present at the meeting (burn-out) and there was a urgent need to clarify the legal position of this community (the chairperson was intending to sell the community to an external entrepreneur). Throughout the meeting it became clear that the community itself was not strong enough to detach from the chairman. They wanted to be given this clarification first (which until now has not been forthcoming).



The third community was Victoria DeLuxe, a very successful organisation that pairs theatre with social activism. We organized an event and prepared well for it. We invited around 90 young people who were involved in NGOs to attend an event: 'Derop of Deronder' (= on top or down the bottom). The letter of invitation contained four appealing questions. These questions were:



- How can we engage citizens in social action?
- How do we ourselves stay healthy and resilient?
- What is the development of activism itself?
- How do I become a happy and sustainable activist?

We got a huge email response. About 25 people signed up for the event. The evening started with a play in the form of a dialogue. This introduced the importance of a dialogue between two opposing worldviews: the scientific worldview versus the social constructionist worldview.

After the dialogical play we had a short break and one hour of collaborative circle. In that



circle we started with a check-in. The group was a varied mix of organizations dealing with climate change, multi-culturalism, poverty, gender, neighborhood work, refugees, terrorism, etc. People shared their needs and ideas, like 'I feel burned out', 'I feel lonely in my struggle', 'activism should become more political'. At the check-out people gave feedback. Some participants were positive about the importance of reflecting on self during activism, others felt disappointed.

Straight after this first event we felt that the connection wasn't empowering for all of us.

Although dialogues were built on open-minded and mutual understanding, there were other factors which made the whole event uninspiring. It didn't start off the kind of movement we had been hoping for. We gathered feedback and found that many factors contributed to make this meeting an epic failure. First of all, because of a double booking the room we had requested was unavailable. We ended up in an extremely large theatre-style room with a bad acoustics. A neighboring group made a lot of noise. Besides these contextual influences, there were issues with the content. People failed to understand the link between the theater play and the theme of the collaborative circle.



The most striking feedback was that people were at odds with our view that there are multiple ways of being an activist. The tendency was that reflection and dialogue do not appear to be understood as an essential element of activism itself. Activism and social work are built on action. There was even a tendency to disagree with talking. More political action was required, according to some major voices in the circle.

The two other planned collaborative circles were cancelled due to a complete lack of interest. This left us feeling puzzled: although we presented ourselves as a free contribution to the activism and social work of our city, nobody seemed to appreciate what we had to offer.

We sent an email afterwards with a summary and with two questions we held back:

1. How can activism be sustainable?
2. Which forms of activism are present and how does activism develop?

We received no response to our summary email.

The fourth community was a start-up political party, called 'De piratenpartij' (the pirate party). Their mission was to articulate a counter-voice against the dominant political parties (left, right or centre). The party leader thought it would be a good idea to help all members to dialogue about the political agenda they wanted to follow. Unfortunately this person forget to introduce us beforehand and on the evening itself we entered the room to the surprise of many of the attendees. The meeting room was above a café; some were drinking beer, others had brought their dog with them. After introducing ourselves and our intention (to facilitate a conversation), some people were hostile in their response: 'We didn't ask you!' 'Are you as psychologists going to tell us how to build conversations? We are not into dialogue, we just say what we have to say'. We explained that it was our intention to serve and to connect. But then they said: 'If you want to connect, just join the club and have a beer'. No facilitation was possible and the coordinator closed the meeting. We left the room after half an hour, upset by the cruelty with which people reacted to our intentions.



The fifth community was a small young organisation 'Labo for change', which introduced 'circles for change'. We participated in an event on White Privilege, attended by about 30 young people. As a participant we saw that the facilitators used a kind of workshop approach. We invited them to improve their way of working by using the dialogical methods. We did conduct some preliminary conversations and the coordinators found it a good idea to organize a try-out with their members. But due to burn-out and personal issues of both the initiative holders, the connection was not consolidated. At this point, it is not sure if this organisation is going to survive.

Lessons learned

1. We are still convinced that it is worthwhile to connect with existing initiatives which have the same higher purpose and intention (promoting a sense of responsibility in citizens, opening up a dialogue, creating a community). Taking a risk and attempting to connect with the Other is a worthwhile effort.

2. Questioning the way we connected with the existing initiatives. We did not join their community and were members for a while before offering, as insiders, a collaborative conversational method. Our strategy was to be clear in what we had to offer. Maybe this direct offer was too abrupt for them and didn't create a safe environment from a relational point of view. It was as if we were selling an idea. On the other hand, we were aware of our goal and intentions. It was not our objective to become insiders. We remained in the position of somebody who wants to deliver something. Reflecting on this position, we can imagine that it is hard to accept an offer made by an outsider. A strong sense of self is required from the other to accept an offer and to collaborate with 'outsiders'.

Although the results of our attempts to connect with existent movements are quite disappointing, we still believe that it must be possible to be very clear about what we have to offer, being humble and full of respect at the same time. We don't want to lose sight of our aim.

3. Hidden dynamics: is all about organizational innovation. Social movements, existing communities and NGOs have their own paradigms of working. It is quite hard to come in from the outside, in the hope that the centre of the paradigm might be willing to open itself up to new ideas. In fact, connecting with existing communities and movements has to be framed as organizational development. Although in these kinds of organizations, all of the conversations were informal, warm and full of motivation, it is still a confrontation of paradigms. The collaborative circle is not innocent. In fact it is a political stance because it requires all members to participate fully, accept the role of self-organizing emergency processes as well as less controlled actions. One of the main differences for example is that activist communities are hands-on. They want decisions, actions, whereas the social constructionist dialogues are built on patience, taking time to go through the process. This asks for a longer-term commitment to coming together in circles.

It is extremely naive to think that a beautiful idea like collaborative circles would be embraced by organisations that do not have a culture of dialogue (but are in dire need of it to complement the one-sidedness of their actions). We entered the sphere of



organizational change. We needed a strategy to sell our idea. We had to find ways to enter the complexity of politics and group dynamics in organisations.

Success at last: starting our own movement

We were growing increasingly disappointed with the lack of results from presenting ourselves to other communities. So, at the same time, from mid-2016 onwards, we started to connect



with colleagues, who were trained as facilitators in collaborative circles. We shifted our attention to our own professional network. We invited about 40 colleagues to explore the possibility of building a network of development-oriented facilitators. 12 people attended the first meeting. During 2016 and 2017 we met on a monthly basis, 11 times in all. We even staged a three-day retreat in August. Every time we came together we used the collaborative circle to build a community and figure

out why, what, and how we wanted to proceed. Some people quit: one was too busy, another one couldn't handle the lack of concreteness. About eight people got together more than ten times. We have given ourselves the tongue-in-cheek name of 'het stichtend comité' ('the boardroom').

The collaborative circle not only proved to be a strong method for building up a social network, it was also a walk-the-talk of our own learning path 'how to build a social movement'. Throughout the year we discovered some remarkably strong design principles. In fact they were not rationally stated, but emerged from our process. In that process we checked what felt right and didn't feel right as to how to organise things. It was a kind of gift that we discovered as a group: how to design a social movement and to give life to it. Here is our list of discoveries:

1. A constitutive element that, from the beginning, felt very important is the location. We met at the home of Lore, one of our colleagues with a living room big enough to host 12 people in a circle. Each time we met, we started or combined the meeting with a meal. One of our members brought organic bread and vegetables from the supermarket and Lore, our host, contributed a home-made soup. Every time, this soup was a piece of art. It was a welcome, a centre of our being together with each other. It was a central part of our community.



2. We didn't start the meeting with an agenda. Each time we formulated the ongoing developmental process, we stated what the theme would be, made it literally central to our conversations and explored each other's personal relationships with that topic. In chronological order: the first five meetings were all about 'what exactly is our relationship with this possibility of creating a network'. We worked through differences about the identity and mission of this social network. Some preferred it to be a vehicle for creating business, others focused on establishing a learning community. Gradually, these different personal motives were absorbed by the umbrella of a higher cause: creating a social movement that would spread the social constructionist methods, which we called, due to my previous work



'Ontwikkelingsgericht Werken', ('developmental work'). In doing this we respected the layered quality of the method itself: everybody has an individual motive, but together we have a team identity, a common ground of community rules and a higher purpose.



3. Learning context. We organized a training session to teach everybody to promote the higher purpose. It is all about storytelling and learning to inspire others with a story. We knew very well that our own capacity to facilitate and inspire other people through the use of collaborative circles, would be at the core of sustainable success.

Thanks to these elevator pitches we formed a connection through. Our passion led us to use an exclamation mark behind the word 'Ontwikkelingsgericht!'

4. We reached the point where it became clear that we had to close down the group for a while. A pattern started to emerge: some people were not consistent in their engagement. We decided as a group that for the next year, bridging 2016 and 2017, it would be necessary not to accept new members to help the process of giving birth to the core of a social movement. It was an inward-oriented move. In a sense it was surprising that a social movement does not start with an exterior outreach of ideas, but with an inward movement of a core of committed people.

5. We were trying to organize ourselves and several questions emerged: 'Do we need to start a trust? Do we need to charge membership fees? How do we use the internet? What strategy would we adopt to launch our social movement?' Fortunately several colleagues came up with examples of existing community-based networks. There is the Taos Institute itself with its community spirit and many brilliant ideas to bring members together. There was Planetree, an organisation with a worldwide mission to enhance health care. They use a benchmark and a quality check. It was the warm language in particular that attracted us to the point that we started referring to it as a role model for ourselves. There was Enspiral, a horizontal self-organizing network which appealed to us because of its lack of administration and top-down management.

Over the next six months, again and again we debated our inclination to organize the movement in a rational way. Each time the discussion was about 'shall we organize this, or shall we go with the flow and see how it goes?' We felt that the rational way to organize the movement might be a pitfall. As a metaphor I used the Sirens from the Odyssey. Odysseus had to resist the beautiful songs of the Sirens, otherwise his ship would wrecked against the rocks. Our seduction lay in the patterns of what is called these days 'oldskool' management.

We discussed the following topics:

- First we thought of establishing a legal entity. But after reflection within our own collaborative circle, we rejected the idea that we have to create such an entity, like a trust, with a board. We really hate to create structures, administration; that is not the core business of the movement itself. Knowing that some structures are necessary, we chose an existing bvba for receipts and expenses. That organization was nothing more than a vehicle.

- At this stage we felt that the financial aspect was of minor importance. I said we had



a grant from the Taos Institute which we could use to finance the first steps. Everybody was happy with that but the focus was never on a business plan or financial gain. The focus was on our own experience, motivation and passion to be the initiators of a movement through our own efforts.

- No need to organise an inside and outside idea of membership and fees. Initially we thought we needed a membership in order to create an inside and outside group. The insiders would then be the believers and movers. We also thought that fees would generate income. How would we otherwise sponsor the work? But after reflection in our collaborative circle we became aware that membership creates a consumerist attitude. If people pay for a membership they will expect us to organize events that they can attend. But a movement is all about ownership. Membership is not the right way to empower people to take action. It is the living experience of being active that creates the membership, not a payment or a card. To cover the topic of financing, we decided that if we needed money we would use crowdfunding, like Wikipedia is doing once in a while. We chose the word 'bondgenoot' (co-developer) instead of 'lid' ('member')

- We definitely wanted to put ourselves on the map as facilitators of collaborative circles. We were looking for a quality mark ('keurmerk' in Dutch). But after reflection in our own collaborative circle, we decided to create a paradoxical way of distinction. We would call it a 'kleurmerk' ('colour mark'). In Dutch the words keurmerk en kleurmerk are only one letter apart.

- In another topic we discussed how we could organize transactions between all of the people that would become part of the movement. We decided to follow the example of the LETS, the new exchange economy. We used the Cyclos platform to organize this banking function. We came up with a name and a value of 20V per hour of work for this currency.

Second phase of the social movement

At the start of 2017 we were ready to open up and embark on the next phase. In teams of two, facilitators of collaborative circles organized a circle in their living room. We invited people we knew but at the same time people were free to invite friends or colleagues to join as well. Some circles were free, others asked for a contribution of 5 or 10 euros. The only criterion would be that participants are open to connect in a sincere way and be receptive to reflection. At this stage the three groups held two or three meetings. In each meeting we used the steps of the collaborative circle.

In all three groups participants are enthusiastic and feel an urge to meet up again soon. Although this process is just at the beginning, it is quite clear that through mouth-to-mouth publicity, the movement will increase in size. More groups will emerge and will be organized in the home towns of the facilitators. Invitees will create an ever larger group of people who learn to dialogue in a personal way and will be open to reflect on larger issues. It is clear that the movement will soon need more facilitators of collaborative circles. At this stage we believe that the presence of a facilitator is of huge importance. His or her task is to check whether the rules of equality are followed and to make sure that the higher purpose is always in place.



Lessons learned

1. The seven-step ritualized collaborative circle is an important anchor for facilitators as well as participants to understand what it is all about. It helps to keep a focus on the essential higher purpose: to dialogue about a topic in a social constructionist way (listening to everybody's story, accepting differences without debate, reflecting on own identity, reflecting on themes related to greater wholes like society, politics, economy, sustainability).

2. Creating a social movement is quite different from designing a trust, an organisation or a business. An important design principle is to give a central place to the importance of felt ownership. It is not about a board that delivers services and consumers that pay the membership fee. It is about connection with a higher purpose and creating the dialogical space so that people feel invited to engage. Transforming existing ways of organizing is a big leverage in launching a social movement. I am also inspired by Semler's way of radical ownership and giving people space to steer themselves.

3. The collaborative circles have become a relational practice of what is felt as a living system. Language is not sufficient to express the experience of what happens in those circles. It is much more than an intervention, a co-creation, or a passionate action plan. Working in a circle is a kind of metaphor for a living cell in a larger whole. The collaborative circle can also be called an organizational tool, a method for co-creation, or a relational practice of a living system. Or perhaps it is rather a field of developmental energy. Whatever the word used, it works in a sustainable way to make decisions and to narrow the gap between differences.

4. Stories, reflections and having an overall narrative of the ongoing process helps us to take the next step of the process. Rather than designing and planning, we observe patterns while walking the path. The continuous reflection on and sharing of our own feeling 'this felt right, this felt wrong' is our only guiding principle.

Generalizing all lessons learned for the larger Taos Community

People are not waiting for or welcoming or seeing the beauty of the value-driven social constructionist idea. Even beautiful ideas have to enter the mud of the world. It is easy to implement collaborative circles within the community of therapists or education or social work if you can apply them in your circle of influence. It is much harder to distribute the ideas in areas where there is no welcoming reflection. The only way out, is to start thinking about social constructionism as a social movement. That's the path we are taking.

Failing is a step along the path.

Social constructionism, if it wants to have more impact, should have a higher focus on the role of structure and system. We need to pay more attention to organizational development models, like those of Semler, Senge, Kanter, Laloux and the patterns social entrepreneurs are using. Is the Taos community entering the stage of seeing itself as an activist movement? I would welcome that. The ideas and principles of social constructionism are very inspiring. They are known by researchers and applied within a rather small circle of therapists, social workers, and teachers. Now the time has come to go into the world, into areas where these ideas are not known, but very much needed.



There is a huge vacuum in best practices, design principles and methods for those like us, who want to embark on spreading the message. Living it and being a role model for others is a first step. But how to disseminate social constructionist ideas in a more systematic way? How to convince colleagues in our own organizations who are not acquainted with these ideas? How to interact with people who are more inclined to debate rather than to dialogue? How to design social constructionism as a movement with a viral effect that creates a difference on a large scale in society?