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PROcoast

A PROactive approach for Communities to enAble Societal Transformation

D4.3 – Case studies tools and collaborative methodology

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BACKGROUND: ABOUT PRO-COAST PROJECT

The PRO-COAST project was launched to address the issue of biodiversity loss in European coastal ecosystems. Around 40% of Europeans live within 100km of the coast, relying directly on ecosystem services that are threatened by both quantitative and qualitative losses. Groups already facing socioeconomic vulnerabilities are likely to be disproportionately affected. PRO-COAST aims to empower local communities to support the restoration and maintenance of biodiversity and ecosystem services across Europe, integrating local knowledge into practice and policymaking. The project is now underway, coordinating the efforts of 20 partners across 14 countries working on 9 unique case study areas. The case studies cover multiple conservation approaches across various coastal ecosystems, testing different governance models and social incentives to engage local actors in adopting technologies and actions for biodiversity conservation.

An important element of PRO-COAST is its holistic, interdisciplinary approach, based on a conceptual framework that treats social-ecological systems as interconnected. By mapping relationships between ecosystem components and uncovering feedback dynamics, the project seeks to identify leverage points for transformative change. PRO-COAST promotes integrated bottom-up decision-making, recognizing that environmental issues cannot be separated from social, economic, and political factors. Through extensive citizen engagement guided by state-of-the-art conservation science, the project aims to build community capacity for biodiversity management, providing scalable solutions that balance conservation needs with local socioeconomic priorities. Now in its early stages, PRO-COAST hopes to inform adaptive, participatory approaches to governance that avoid biodiversity losses and ensure sustainable, equitable access to coastal resources.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This deliverable provides a comprehensive set of guidelines and tools for conducting case study research, with a focus on facilitating dialogue, interviews, focus group discussions, and coaching circles. The tools and methodologies outlined here are designed to support the PRO-COAST project's objectives, particularly in engaging stakeholders and fostering collaborative, participatory approaches to coastal community governance. The guidelines are informed by the Theory U framework and other systems-based approaches, ensuring that the research process is inclusive, iterative, and adaptive to the needs of diverse stakeholders.

LINKS WITH OTHER PROJECT ACTIVITIES

This document describes the collaborative methodology tools that can be used by case studies in PRO-COAST but also more broadly in cases facing climate related-challenges. It aims at offering to local communities a powerful methodology and the tools to overcome their habitual ways of thinking that prevents them from evolving. It guides coastal communities through the path of co-creation in which key stakeholders can make their own contribution to possible solutions related to societal transformation towards sustainability, in tune with their actual needs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Scope of the document

While this deliverable primarily draws upon Theory U as a holistic and participatory framework for fostering transformation in coastal communities, it also acknowledges the value of complementary change management models. One such model is Kotter's 8-Step Change Process (Kotter 1996), widely recognized for its structured, stepwise approach to leading organizational change. Whereas Theory U emphasizes deep listening, collective reflection, and the co-creation of shared futures—particularly valuable when leadership structures are fluid or emerging—Kotter's method offers a clear and pragmatic pathway for executing change, especially in contexts where urgent, top-down mobilization is needed. By integrating the reflective depth of Theory U with the operational clarity of Kotter's framework, PRO-COAST enables both the emergence of community-led leadership and the execution of tangible, scalable actions. This duality ensures that transformative change is not only envisioned collaboratively but also implemented effectively.

Developed by Otto Scharmer and the Presencing Institute at MIT, Theory U is a framework designed to guide organizations through complex challenges and transform their processes, structures, and culture to achieve a desired future. The central concept of Theory U is the understanding that creating meaningful change requires us to move beyond focusing solely on symptoms and outcomes. Instead, we must direct our attention and intentions toward the situations we face (Ostrom, 1990; Zhang and Barr , 2019). This aligns with Ostrom's ideas, research, and theoretical framework used in PRO-COAST.

Ostrom, in her 1990 book *Governing the Commons*, introduces the idea that complex social-ecological systems cannot be understood merely by analyzing their symptoms or isolated outcomes. She emphasizes the importance of focusing on the underlying conditions and interactions within these systems, arguing that sustainable governance requires understanding the local context, the rules governing resource use, and the patterns of behavior that emerge within communities.

Key concepts from Ostrom that align with this perspective include:

1. **Institutional Diversity and Contextual Conditions**: Ostrom argues that the success of governance systems depends on how well they fit with the local context, including the specific social, cultural, and ecological conditions of the community (Ostrom, 1990). This suggests that in order to create meaningful change, we need to understand the deeper, context-specific factors that drive behavior, rather than merely focusing on superficial symptoms or outcomes.
2. **Polycentric Governance**: Ostrom highlights the importance of polycentric governance, where multiple layers of governance interact, and decisions are made by various actors at different levels. This aligns with the idea in Theory U that leadership is distributed across stakeholders and that change is co-created by the collective capacity of a system.
3. **The Role of Social Capital**: Ostrom emphasizes that social capital—trust, norms, and networks that enable collective action—plays a crucial role in achieving sustainable outcomes in common-pool resource management. This aligns with the need to focus on the quality of relationships and the conditions from which people operate, as highlighted in Theory U.
4. **Adaptive Systems and Learning**: Ostrom advocates for adaptive management in response to the changing conditions of complex systems, where stakeholders continuously learn from their actions

and adjust their strategies accordingly. This mirrors the Theory U approach of focusing on the co-creation of future outcomes through collective learning and adaptation.

This approach requires altering our habitual ways of thinking and mental models. It emphasizes the need to consider not only what people need and can achieve but also the conditions—including thoughts, motivations, incentives, and aspirations—that influence their actions. Equally critical is the transformation of leadership towards a model of co-creation. The co-creating leadership model moves away from a hierarchical structure with a single leader and followers. Instead, it fosters the collective capacity of a system (e.g. a community impacted by climate change) to co-create a future reality (Davies et al., 2012; Kahane, 2012). In this model, leadership is distributed across stakeholders. Theory U offers both a framework for understanding new leadership capabilities and practical methods and tools to help groups of people develop these capabilities. Drawing from systems theory, Theory U integrates various approaches for driving social change including **Action research** and organizational learning, as advanced by Peter Senge, Ed Schein, Kurt Lewin, Chris Argyris, and others (Senge, 1990; Schein, 1999; Lewin, 1997; Argyris and Schon, 1978, 1995; Peris-Ortiz, et al., 2018); **Design thinking**, as proposed by Tim Brown, Dave Kelley, and others (Brown, 2009; Kelley and Kelley, 2013); **Cognitive science**, in the tradition of Francisco Varela (Varela, 1999; Varela and Shear, 1999).

When applying Theory U within a social setting, the emphasis lies on differentiating between observing people's behaviors within their specific contexts and uncovering the underlying sources and conditions that influence these actions. This involves exploring the various dimensions of the social environment, the quality of interactions between individuals and groups, and the components of the broader systems and sub-systems that shape thought patterns and behaviors (Scharmer, 2018; Olson, 1965). Theory U arose from a key insight shared by its founders, Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, during a conversation with a leader about transformational change. During this conversation it became apparent that it is crucial not only to observe what leaders do and how they approach their roles, but also to recognize the deeper, internal source from where their decisions and actions arise. This internal foundation significantly influences their perceptions, mental models, and overall behavior (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013a; 2013b).

The U process consists of the following five parts:

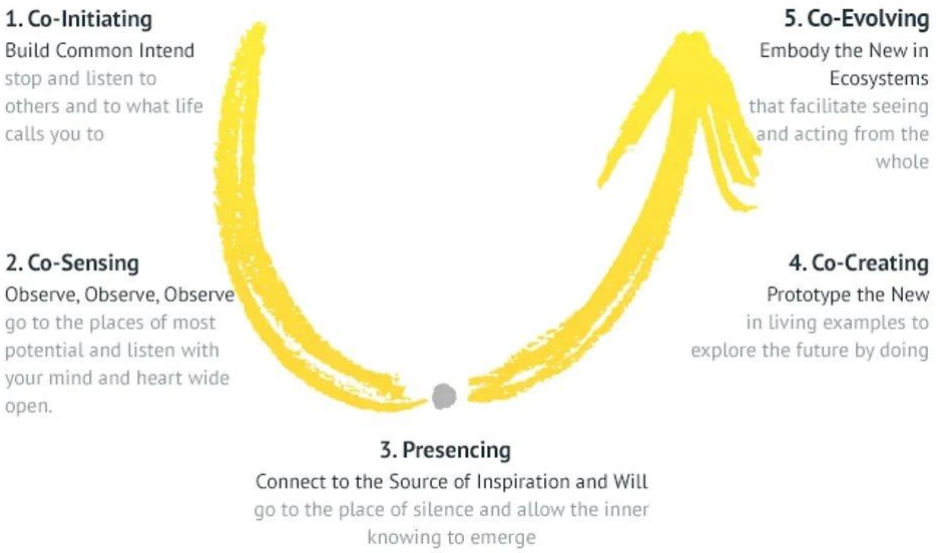


Figure 1: Theory U (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013a)

Each of the five stages in the U process involves significant cognitive shifts. As a group or organization progresses through the U-journey, these shifts must occur both at the individual and collective levels. This is an essential part of the co-creation process, which various scholars have identified as crucial for social innovation (Neumeier, 2017; Phillips, et al., 2015; Pol and Ville, 2009; Rossi, 2017).

Scharmer (2018) outlines five stages of cognitive change which describe how individuals and groups shift from habitual thinking to transformative action. Scharmer's U-process describes a journey from reactive problem-solving (stuck in past patterns) to co-creating regenerative futures. The stages are described as follows:

1. **Co-initiating** (Downloading): At this stage, individuals and groups move away from relying on past habits, experiences, and outdated methods. Continuing to operate based on past knowledge limits the emergence of new ideas and perspectives.
2. **Co-Sensing:** The challenge at this stage is to stop repeating old patterns—to let go of habits, assumptions, and ways of thinking that no longer help. This starts by carefully observing what's really happening, getting clear about what you want to achieve, understanding the problem, and figuring out where to begin. This ability to truly see the current situation—both alone and as a group—is essential in the U-journey. Many new ideas don't fail because of a lack of vision or good intentions, but because leaders don't fully understand or deal with the reality in front of them (Schein, 1989).
3. **Presencing**: This stage is about pausing and reflecting. It's a moment to let go of old ways and create space for new ideas to emerge. These new insights don't just come from analysis or data—they also come from local knowledge, shared experiences, and group creativity. This is the time to collectively form a vision.
4. **Co-creating**: In this phase a vision is crystallized. The main difference between forming a vision and crystallizing a vision is that by the time a vision is crystallized, people have already gone through deep changes in how they see things (this happens in the first part of the U-journey). At this point, the vision becomes clear and shared by everyone. After a quiet moment of reflection during the "Presencing" stage, the group feels ready to move forward together. This is when the action starts—people begin working as a team to explore ideas and turn them into real projects (Miquel et al., 2013).
5. **Co-evolving** (testing and growing ideas): At this stage, the focus is on trying out new ideas in real life through small, hands-on experiments. These early versions—called prototypes—don't need to be perfect. They're meant to help us test what works, learn from it, and make improvements. Once the prototype shows promise, the next step is to expand or scale it up—taking what was learned in a small group and applying it to a bigger setting, like a whole organization or community. This shift isn't just about size. It's about changing how the whole system works. For that to happen, people need to keep learning, stay open to different perspectives, and move from thinking only about individual roles to thinking about the bigger picture (Voltan and De Fuentes, 2016; Westley and Antadze, 2010).

This framework can help categorize where each PRO-COAST case study currently sits in its path toward change. Some communities, like Comino Island (Malta), are already scaling interventions (*co-evolving*), while others, such as Corbu (Romania), are in early phases of awareness-building (*co-initiating*).

In the next section, we illustrate each stage with examples from the PRO-COAST case studies, demonstrating how coastal communities can move through the U-process to address biodiversity loss and sustainability challenges.

2. THEORY U – 5 STAGES WITH PRO-COAST CASE MAPPING

2.1 Co-Initiating (Downloading + Seeing)

Kloogaranna-Laulasmaa, Estonia (EU CS8)

This case study largely fits into the Co-initiating and Co-sensing stages of the U Theory. Its primary focus is on building a common understanding and developing shared goals and a common vision for the coastal area. The engagement of stakeholders and collection of evidence from interviews are key elements of the Co-sensing stage.

2.2 Co-Sensing

Aquatina di Frigole, Italy (EU CS2)

This case fits primarily within the Co-sensing stage of Theory U, as the planned actions focus on collecting biodiversity data and assessing the ecological dynamics occurring in the coastal lagoon of Aquatina through the application of innovative molecular tools (e.g., DNA barcoding, eDNA metabarcoding). Future activities will then lead the case study within the Co-creation stage, as the planned initiatives promote active stakeholder involvement in coastal protection and monitoring through a Joint Task Force of Stakeholders involved in different initiatives like plastic cleanup, dissemination activities, and collecting environmental samples.

Boka Kotorska Bay, Montenegro (EU CS4)

This case fits in the co-sensing phase of Theory U. The case focuses on the environmental and socio-economic impacts of cruise tourism in a highly sensitive and culturally significant ecosystem. Through a systematic review of existing research and stakeholder mapping, the case has engaged a broad spectrum of actors—from national ministries and port authorities to local communities, NGOs, and the tourism sector—to raise awareness of biodiversity loss and its implications for human well-being. Stakeholder engagement efforts have been geared toward fostering shared understanding and identifying barriers to conservation, such as weak regulatory enforcement and competing economic interests. The process has laid the groundwork for deeper dialogue and collective exploration of sustainable alternatives.

2.3 Presencing

Corbu, Romania (EU CS9)

The primary objective of this case study is to educate and encourage individuals to engage in a different type of tourism. This fits well with Stage 3 – Presencing as it involves a transformational vision of how tourism can evolve in harmony with local ecosystems. Furthermore, it has the potential to evolve into Stage 4 – Co-creating, since it involves the development of a masterplan for a sustainable development of the area.

Bergen, Norway (EU CS7a)

The case study is currently in the Presencing stage. The community is reflecting on recent political decisions, to proceed forward with the cruise ship terminal, which conflicts with public and formal expert evaluations. There is growing disagreement in the community with how politicians are proceeding, and awareness of the issue increases – creating a momentum. Simultaneously there is a battle of narratives between the economic, political and citizen side regarding the scale of the terminal and its significance for the coastal area. It is a moment for the community to cope with the current set-back and exploring forms of action, build positive narratives, and possibly find inspiration from other similar situations in the country.

2.4 Co-Creating (Crystallizing + Prototyping)

Boka Kotorska Bay, Montenegro (NO-EU CS4)

Many of the actions in this case study—such as the surveys, combined with awareness and education campaigns—align with the second stage of the Theory U, Co-sensing, as they aim to gather insights and perspectives from various stakeholders. Additionally, actions like the reflective study visit provide an opportunity to learn from successful models and inspire a new vision, indicating a transition into the Presencing phase. Moreover, the development of policy recommendations reflects a move into the Co-creating stage, where new understanding is translated into tangible strategies for improvement.

Arne Parish, UK (EU CS6)

Thanks to discussion of issues that was promoted by earlier surveys and strong local conservation interest, this case illustrates a rapid transition through Co-initiating and Co-sensing, resulting from early collaboration and system understanding. It has now moved on to Co-creating, with agreement between local authorities, landowners, and wildlife managers as a preparation for real-world application. Current Presencing with NGOs is enabling a private forum on the Pro-Coast CUSP that also includes the other stakeholders and should provide a future basis for Co-evolution.

Comino Island, Malta (EU CS1)

This case study spans Co-initiating, Presencing, and Co-creating stages of Theory U. The planned and implemented actions not only raise awareness and shape a vision for the future through the establishment of a unique sustainable environmental education center, but also actively engage the local community, authorities, and visitors through educational activities and ongoing cleanups. These efforts collectively contribute toward a zero-waste island and represent the Co-creating stage.

2.5 Co-Evolving (Performing)

Sligo, Ireland (EU CS5)

This case study serves as a compelling example of a full Theory U process. It starts at Stage 1 (Co-initiating) with stakeholder engagement. It deepens into Stage 2 (Co-sensing) with data gathering and assessments and touches Stage 3 (Presencing) as it raises awareness of deeper issues and as potential shifts in approach emerge. It moves strongly into Stage 4 (Co-creating) with community action and restoration work and finally reaches Stage 5 (Co-evolving) through ongoing monitoring of dunes restoration biodiversity changes, and the impact of community and tourism activities.

Bergen, Norway (EU CS7b)

This case revolves around a practical coastal clean-up initiative focused on marine restoration, supported by data collection and stakeholder collaboration to develop prevention strategies and circular solutions (e.g., a second-hand shop for reused fishing gear). Starting with community clean-ups above water, awareness of ghost gear emerged (co-initiating), expanding networks where data and best practices were shared about the issue of ghost-fishing (co-sensing). This led to a pilot project for ghost gear removal, refurbishment and sale as well as a social media campaign (co-creating). The successful pilot resulted in insightful data, reflections, outreach, learning, and a funding application for a large-scale intervention. The current phase aligns with Stage 5: Co-evolving.

Strunjan, Slovenia (NO-EU CS3)

This case study fits well with the fourth stage of Theory U. Local communities and authorities have recognized the issues threatening the area's sustainability (Co-sensing). They have gathered insights and are collectively working on developing strategies – prototype solutions to improve the management of invasive and commensal species, reduce human-wildlife conflicts, and address illegal waste sites, which aligns with Co-evolving.

3. THE 5 STAGES OF THEORY U WITHIN PRO-COAST

Theory U offers a comprehensive participatory methodology designed to achieve several objectives: a) facilitate the transition of local communities towards new organizational paradigms to overcome governance and organizational barriers, b) nurture a culture of collaboration and co-creation among community members, c) transform current realities in local communities by offering a participatory approach to altering mental models and established beliefs. The following sections provide a detailed step-by-step guide for the activities included in each of the five stages of Theory U.

a. Co-Initiating: Starting Together with Shared Purpose

This is the first step in the Theory U process. It's about bringing people together, listening deeply, and building enough trust to begin working as one group. The immediate goal is not to make a plan yet—it's to connect, listen, and sense what really matters to the people involved.

Activities in this stage:

1. Invite the right people. Bring together a mix of voices—locals, experts, young people, and others who care about the place. Make sure everyone feels welcome.
2. Listen to each other. Create space for open conversations. Let people share their stories, worries, and hopes without jumping to solutions.
3. Build trust. Spend time getting to know each other. Use simple activities—like walks, meals, or group circles—to create bonds.
4. Notice what matters most. Pay attention to what people care about. Try to name a shared purpose or question that the group feels called to work on.
5. Form a core team. Let a small group of committed people step forward to carry the work forward and guide the next steps of the process.

b. Co-Sensing

Co-sensing is the next phase in the process, where the focus is on understanding the stakeholders, their deeper motivations, values, and needs and the context in which they will be operating within the coastal communities. The goal of the co-sensing phase is to facilitate a deep connection between diverse stakeholders, creating a shared sense of purpose and a common vision for the coastal community.

The co-sensing phase typically involves a number of activities, aiming at gathering information about the stakeholders and their environments, as well as their experiences and attitudes. The data collected during this phase can be analyzed to identify patterns and trends, which can then guide the development of an integrated approach to designing solutions for coastal community resilience. To achieve the connection

between stakeholders, the community needs to take a series of steps that will help stakeholders understand the needs and motivations of the community members:

1. Map and invite diverse voices. Identify all groups affected by or connected to the issue—especially those who are often left out. Prior to identifying specific individuals, define different types of stakeholders that represent the different user groups within the community. The purpose here is the active involvement of multiple players who may have not yet worked together, in co-creating system level change. Attention should be given to include stakeholders whose voice is not frequently heard or whose voice represents the voice of judgment and criticism.
2. Background research. Visit communities, listen to personal stories, observe daily routines. Use interviews, group walks, and informal conversations to see how people experience the local environment.
3. Take sensing journeys. Bring mixed groups (e.g. youth, scientists, fishers, planners) to places that allow people to learn about the environment—like polluted wetlands, restored coastlines, or local farms. Let the place speak through the people who live and work there.

c. Presencing

Presencing is a stage of reflection where stakeholders can see new possibilities and insights that were previously hidden from their view. This is achieved through a process of letting go of preconceptions, biases, and mental models, and opening up to new perspectives and insights. During the Presencing phase of the transformative process, a reflection space is established before the community moves from observation to action. This phase allows perspectives that are less familiar to contribute to new ways of understanding and new insights.

The Presencing stage includes the following steps:

1. Fostering a culture of openness and curiosity: Encourage community members to be open and curious, and to approach discussions and decision-making with an open mind.
2. Reframing problems: Encourage members to reframe problems as opportunities for innovation and growth. By approaching challenges from a different perspective, new solutions and ideas can emerge.
3. Prepare to take action: Invite community members to identify key insights they believe are worth exploring further in the next phase, that of Co-creating. This may involve developing new strategies, systems, or technologies that support sustainability.

d. Co-creating

This is the stage where communities begin to test what they sensed during the earlier stages. Instead of planning big solutions, they start small-building prototypes, trying things out, and learning by doing.

Activities in this stage include:

1. Co-design in action. Small teams work together to sketch and build real world examples of possible solutions-like nature-based restoration activities, community tools, or new collaboration formats.

2. Prototype and test. Rather than launch full plans, communities try "safe-to-fail" experiments. These small pilots help reveal what works, what needs changing, and what's worth scaling up at a later stage.
3. Learn-as-you-go Feedback is built in. After each experiment, the group reflects: What did we learn? What surprised us? What should we change?
4. Grow a network of doers. As prototypes grow, so does the network. Teams connect across sites, share lessons, and help each other overcome roadblocks.

e. Co-evolving

Co-Evolving is the final stage in the Theory U process. It's when communities take what they've tested and start growing it—sharing what they've learned, improving their ideas, and helping others do the same.

In PRO-COAST, this means moving from small experiments to acts that have a bigger impact. It's when good ideas become long-term practices that can shape policies, support nature, and strengthen community life.

What happens during this phase:

1. Keep learning from experience

   Projects like *Comino Island (Malta)* and *Boka Kotorska Bay (Montenegro)* are already testing new ways of managing nature. In this phase, they look at what's working, gathering feedback, and improving their approach step by step.

2. Decide what to grow

   Not every idea needs to scale—but some do. Communities choose which prototypes (like education programs or restoration methods) are ready to be expanded or shared with others.

3. Connect to bigger systems

   The work doesn't stop locally. PRO-COAST teams now link with national authorities, EU policy forums, and other projects to spread useful lessons and support bigger changes.

4. Tell your story

   Sharing is key. Whether it's a video, guidebook, map, or exhibition, communities document what they've done so others can learn, be inspired, or build on it.

5. Support each other

   As more case studies move forward, teams help one another. They share problems and solutions across countries—like *Slovenia's citizen science tools* or *Ireland's dune protection work*—building a strong network of doers across different localities.

6. Make it last

   PRO-COAST hubs keep meeting after the Project period. They stay active by setting up support groups, follow-up workshops, or new learning spaces to help keep the energy going and the change alive.

4. Overview: Theory U Steps & Engagement Tools

As discussed above, Theory U is a framework for leading change and consists of five main phases. Each phase is associated with specific tools that can be used to support the process. The aim is to support coastal communities and stakeholders across PRO-COAST case studies as they co-create new ways of restoring biodiversity, adapting to environmental pressures, and building inclusive governance. Each tool can be adapted based on the local context, stakeholder diversity, and specific needs of the site.

The **first phase** of Theory U is "Co-initiating." This phase is about bringing the right people together, building trust, and forming a shared intention. Rather than jumping into solutions, communities listen deeply and identify what matters most.

Tools used in this phase include:

- Hosting – A technique for creating a safe and inclusive space where people can come together and share their perspectives.
- Network Mapping – A technique for visualizing the different stakeholders and their relationships, to identify potential allies and barriers to change.
- Guided Journaling – A technique that helps individuals explore their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in relation to a specific topic or challenge. Use reflective prompts like 'What future do I care about?'
- Peer Coaching Groups – A technique which engages in a reflective and supportive process. It allows small groups of individuals to deepen their learning and advance their personal and professional development.
- Listening Practices – Introduce levels of listening to raise awareness of how people engage.
- Empathy Walks – Visit local sites (e.g. beaches, wetlands) together to share personal stories.

The **second phase** of Theory U is "Co-sensing." Communities explore the full picture of what's happening—socially, ecologically, and culturally. This phase is about seeing the system through many lenses. Tools used in this phase include:

- Sensing Journeys – Visit places of significance: eroded dunes, polluted zones, restored areas.
- Deep Listening Dialogues – Use open questions to explore concerns, not just concentrate on solutions.
- Shadowing – Spend time with others (e.g. farmers, fishers, rangers) to understand daily realities. This is a technique for observing and experiencing a situation from the perspective of those affected by the problem
- Participatory Mapping – Draw maps showing ecological and human patterns.
- Social Theatre – Act out moments of conflict or “stuckness” using role play.
- 4D Mapping – Represent key system roles to explore tensions and possibilities.
- Visual Modelling – Use localized drawings, clay, or 3D models to make issues tangible

The **third phase** of Theory U is "Presencing." At the bottom of the U, people slow down and reconnect to their deeper sense of purpose. This stage is about insight, stillness, and creativity—before people begin to take action. Tools used in this phase include:

- Silent Reflection – Create quiet spaces in nature or indoors.
- Journaling Questions – 'What is being asked of me now?' or 'What am I ready to let go of?'
- Mindfulness & Breathwork – Ground people before group sessions.
- Collective Story Harvest – Listen to personal stories that hold meaning.
- Artistic Expression – Invite collage, drawing, or simple creative tasks to unlock ideas.
- Guided Visualization – Imagine a thriving coastline 10 years from now.
- Inspiring Videos/Stories – Use videos or stories to inspire individuals or teams to address common challenges.

The **fourth phase** of Theory U is "Co-creating." Here, teams build and test small actions—called prototypes. These are not final solutions, but early experiments that help people learn by doing. Tools used in this phase include:

- Prototyping Labs – Small teams test ideas like citizen science tools, new trails, or education games.
- Feedback Loops – After testing, gather input and adapt fast.
- Design Thinking – Develop ideas based on real user needs.
- Appreciative Inquiry – Focus on what's working and build from those strengths.
- Coaching Circles – Reflect together on what's emerging across sites and prototypes.

The **final phase** of Theory U is "Co-evolving." In this final phase, successful prototypes begin to scale. Communities embed new practices into policy, culture, and governance. Tools used in this phase include:

- Action Planning – Turn ideas into practical next steps with clear roles.
- The Creative Tension Exercise – A tool that helps individuals and organizations navigate the gap between their current reality and their desired future state.
- System Alignment – Work with authorities to embed new practices.
- Reflective Harvesting – Capture learnings regularly and feed them forward, evaluating the effectiveness of the solutions implemented.
- Peer Learning – Share stories and tools across sites
- Narrative Building – Use exhibitions, videos, and local media to tell the story.

The tools used in every phase of Theory U are summarized in the following diagram. It is evident that certain tools can be used in more than one phase. Each tool is described below in terms of time, content and implementation.

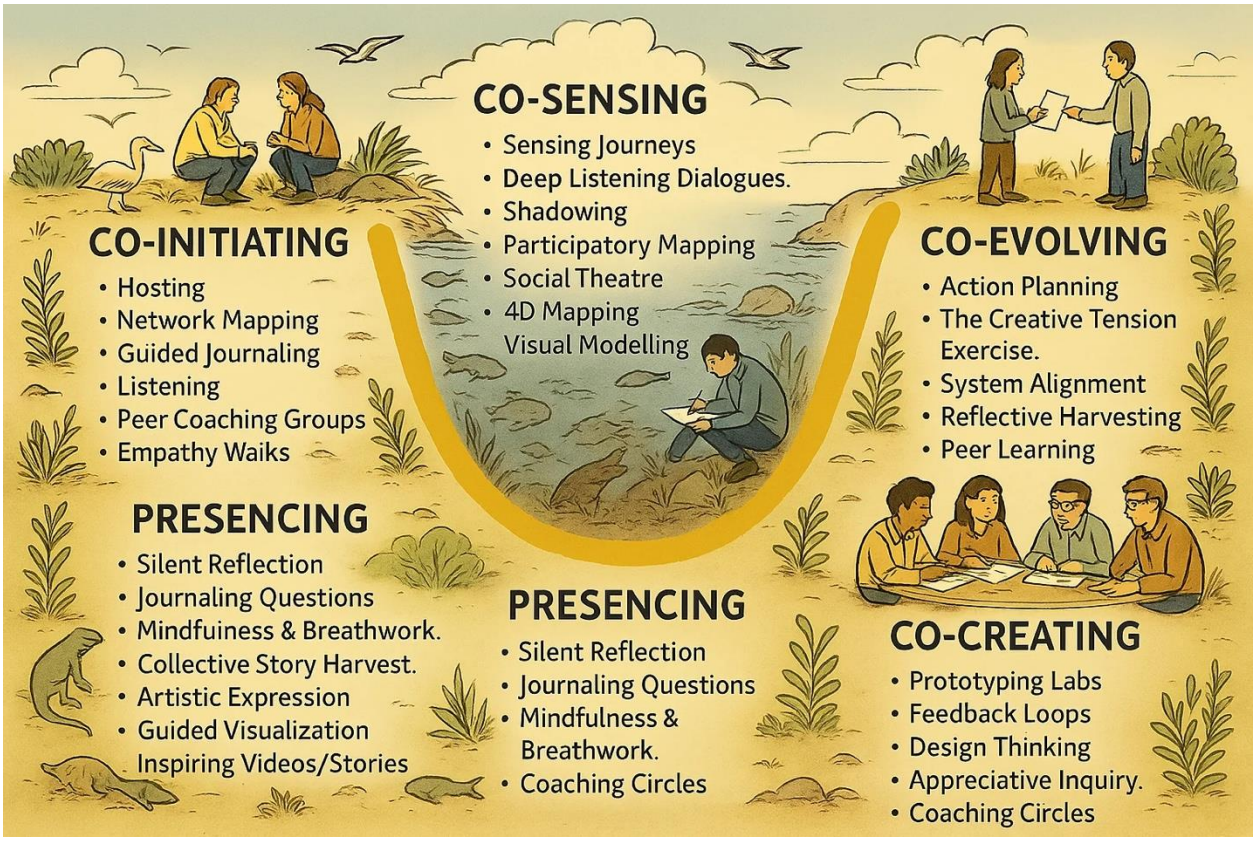


Figure 2: Theory U Methods and Tools (n.d.)

a. Co-initiating Phase Tools

HOSTING



Time: Depends on the context

What it is: Hosting is about creating a safe and welcoming space for people to come together, share openly, listen deeply, and work creatively as a group. It helps build trust and encourages honest conversations.

Steps:

1. Set the scene: Arrange the space so people feel comfortable and ready to talk. Set clear, respectful ground rules.

2. Listen deeply: Pay close attention to others. Don't judge or jump to conclusions. Try to really understand what they mean and how they feel.

3. Ask thoughtful questions: Ask open questions that help people think in new ways. Focus on exploring ideas, not solving things right away.

4. Work together on ideas: Brainstorm with others and come up with possible solutions as a team. Try out different ideas together.

5. Test your ideas: Put your ideas into practice and see what works. Use feedback to make them better.

6. Reflect together: Talk about what you've learned and how you can use it in the future.

NETWORK MAPPING



Time: flexible

What it is: Network mapping helps you see how people and groups are connected. It's useful for understanding complex situations and finding where change is needed.

Steps:

1. List the key people/groups: Who are the important people, organizations, or groups involved?

2. Decide what you're focusing on: What part of the system are you trying to understand?

3. Draw the map: Create a visual diagram showing how the people/groups are connected.

4. Label the relationships: Show what kind of relationship each connection represents (friendly, neutral, competitive, etc.), and how strong it is.

5. Find what's missing: Look for gaps or missing connections—these might be blind spots.

6. Look for patterns: Analyze the map to find trends, key players, and areas where change can happen.

7. Update as needed: Keep improving the map as you learn more.

PEER COACHING GROUPS



Time: 60-75 minutes

What it is: This is a way for small groups to help each other work through real challenges. One person shares their issue, and the others help by listening and asking questions. It's **not** about giving advice—it's about helping the person find their own insights.

Principles:

- Use a real, current challenge.

- The person sharing must be someone who can make decisions in the case.

- Everyone is equal—no hierarchy.

- The focus is on listening, not "fixing."

Setup:

- Group size: 4–5 people

- Quiet space (in-person or online)

- Timekeeper and note-taker

- Each person brings a journal

Steps:

1. Roles (~2 mins): Case-giver shares a personal challenge. Coaches listen deeply—no advice. A timekeeper keeps the session on track.

2. Tell the story (10–15 mins): Case-giver explains the issue, who's involved, their personal vision for the future, what they need to let go of, and what kind of help they need. Coaches: Do not try to "fix" the problem by offering advice; instead, listen. Attend to the images, feelings, and gestures that the story evokes in you (both case-givers and coaches).

3. Pause and reflect (~2 mins): Everyone sits quietly and notices images, emotions, and body responses.

4. Share reflections (10 mins): Coaches share what they noticed; the case giver responds.

5. Group dialogue (20 mins): Discuss reflections together. Explore new perspectives **without** trying to solve the problem.

6. Wrap up (8 mins): Coaches and case-giver share final thoughts and thank each other.

7. Personal journaling (2 mins): Everyone writes down what they learned.

b. Co-sensing phase Tools

SENSING JOURNEYS



Time: The length of a Sensing Journey depends on the scope of the content being covered and the number of relevant conversations.

What it is: Sensing journeys are knowledge journeys, which help people step outside their usual routines and explore different places, people, and ideas. The goal is to understand the bigger picture and see things from new perspectives. These journeys are great for breaking habits, seeing systems more clearly, and building real connections with people involved.

Tips for a strong sensing journey:

- Listen on three levels: to others, to yourself, and to what's emerging.

- Visit places that matter and meet people in their real locations (not formal offices).

- Stay open-minded and curious—observe without judging.

Setup:

- People: About 5 participants with different backgrounds. Include people who are affected most by the issue.

- Places: Choose 2–3 places that reflect different sides of the system (e.g., innovators, outsiders, overlooked voices).

- Time: Varies based on places and people visited.

- Materials: Bring journals, pens, and—if permitted—take photos or record parts of the conversation.

Steps:

1. Choose where to go and who to meet. Focus on people who will offer different viewpoints.
2. Prepare together. Ask:
   - What do we expect to experience?
   - Who are the people we'll meet?

- What assumptions are we bringing?
- What questions will guide our visit? (Make a list of 7–10.)

3. Do the journey.
   - Visit in person or online.
   - Ask open, honest questions.
   - Practice deep listening—pause before jumping to the next question.

   Examples of questions to ask:
   - *What brought you to this role?*
   - *What challenges/opportunities do you face?*
   - *What are the deeper system problems?*
   - *What change would make the biggest impact?*
   - *Who else should we speak to?*

4. Reflect individually. Right after each visit:
   - *What surprised or touched you?*
   - *What would this place be like if it were a living being?*
   - *What might it want to become?*
   - *What helps this place thrive? What holds it back?*
   - *What did this teach you about potential future solutions?*
5. Thank the host. Send a short note with your appreciation and one insight you gained.
6. Group reflection.
   - Share who you met, what you did, and what stood out.
   - Bring in quotes or moments.
   - Discuss ideas that emerged as a group.

DIALOGUE



Time: 30 minutes to a few hours

What it is: Dialogue is about having open, honest conversations where everyone feels safe to share their views. It's a way to understand complex issues better by listening without judging.

Steps:

1. Create a safe space: Agree on rules like listening with respect and no interrupting.
2. Start with a clear topic: Choose something meaningful that invites different views.
3. Share personal stories: Everyone shares their own experience related to the topic.
4. Listen deeply: Don’t just hear; really pay attention with an open mind and heart.
5. Reflect as a group: Talk about what stood out, surprised you, or taught you something new.
6. Create ideas together: Use what came up to think of new approaches or shared goals.

SHADOWING



Time: Flexible

What it is: Shadowing means spending time with someone to see things from their point of view. It helps you understand their work or situation better by simply observing.

Steps:

1. Pick a situation: Choose something you want to learn more about (e.g. a job, process, or issue).
2. Find a guide: Ask someone who's involved in that situation to let you follow them for a while.
3. Observe: Watch how they act, what they do, and how they interact with others. Take notes.
4. Reflect: Afterward, think about what you saw and what it means. What was new or unexpected?
5. Share your insights: Tell others what you learned—either in a group or through a short write-up.

DATA GATHERING



Time: varies

What it is: Data gathering means collecting and analyzing information to understand a situation better. This helps identify patterns, needs, and opportunities for change.

Steps:

1. Define your question: Be clear on what you want to learn or explore.
2. Find your sources: Decide where your information will come from—e.g. surveys, interviews, reports.
3. Collect data: Use different methods to gather info (interviews, observations, stats, etc.).
4. Analyze: Look for trends, patterns, or surprises in what you have found.
5. Draw conclusions: Based on your findings, decide what you've learned or what actions are needed.
6. Share your findings: Present your insights clearly—in reports, visuals, or group discussions.

The data gathering tool is a method used in the Theory U framework to collect and analyse information about a particular context or issue. This tool is particularly useful for identifying patterns and trends, as well as identifying potential areas for improvement or innovation.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS



- **Time:** 30–45 minutes for a phone interview
- 30–90 minutes for a face-to-face interview
- 30 minutes prep and follow-up

What it is: Interviewing key people affected by or involved in your project helps you understand their needs and views. It builds trust and shows respect for their role. To conduct effective stakeholder interviews, it is important to adhere to certain principles. These principles include establishing transparency and trust with the interviewee regarding the purpose and process of the interview, suspending judgment to understand the situation through the interviewee's eyes, and asking simple questions. Being fully present and attentive

during stakeholder interviews is critical. By avoiding interruptions and allowing moments of silence, practitioners can create opportunities for deeper reflection and a more productive conversation.

Steps:

1. Prepare:
   - Choose who to interview.
   - Prepare guiding questions.
   - Schedule time and plan your approach.

2. Get ready:
   - Take 20–30 minutes before to prepare.
   - Stay open and curious.

3. Interview:
   - Ask open, honest questions, spontaneously: Feel free to deviate from your prepared questions if others occur to you. The questions are designed to serve you and your work—not the other way around.
   - Listen deeply and avoid interrupting.

   Sample questions:
   - *What is most important to you right now?*
   - *How can this work support your goals?*
   - *What changes would make the biggest difference?*

4. Reflect: Right after the conversation, note key insights.

5. Close the loop: Send a thank-you note and share a brief takeaway.

SOCIAL THEATRE – THE "STUCK" EXERCISE



Time: About 30–60 minutes per session

What it is: This exercise helps people understand what's "stuck" in a group or system using body movements. It encourages people to express their feelings and insights through posture and movement, instead of words. It helps uncover new ideas and solutions that are not obvious in regular discussions.

Steps:

1. Prepare the space:
   - Group of 4–6 people, in a quiet space or online (camera showing full body).
   - Make sure everyone has space to move freely.

2. Sculpture 1 – Feeling stuck:
   - Sit together and think of a situation that feels stuck or blocked.
   - Let your body express that feeling with a posture or gesture.
   - One by one, share your "stuck shape" with the group.
   - Reflect together briefly on what was seen or felt.

3. Sculpture 2 – Moving forward:
   - Let the stuck posture slowly change and move.
   - Follow your body, not your head.
   - When the movement feels complete, stop.
   - Reflect on the change and how it felt.

4. Group Stuck (optional):
   - As a group, recreate one person's stuck shape.
   - Sit with the shared feeling.
   - Let the group move together until it stops.
   - Reflect again as a group: What changed? What did we learn?

5. Reflection:
   - *What was the difference between the "stuck" and the "shifted" posture?*
   - *Where did the movement start—from the body or the group?*
   - *What insights or emotions came up?*
   - *What does this say about what needs to change in the system?*

ROLE PLAYING (4D MAPPING)



Time: 60–90 minutes

What it is: 4D Mapping is a creative way to explore a system (like a school, hospital, or community) by acting it out. People take on roles in the system—like a leader, a worker, or an administrator—and show how they feel using their bodies. This helps everyone see the hidden dynamics and where change is needed.

Setup:

- Roles: Choose 10–12 key roles that represent parts of the system.

- Participants: One person per role, plus others who watch and hold space.

- Space: If you are practicing 4D mapping in person, typically have people sitting in a circle, with players embodying roles in the centre of the circle.

- Enough room to move around or a video call where people can show full body.

Steps:

1. Introduce the case:
   - The group or key stakeholder explains the situation.
   - Everyone listens with an open mind.

2. Choose roles:
   - Facilitator says the name of the role and holds up the first card, with a pre-determined role written on it (e.g. teacher, policymaker, youth, nature).

- The player takes the card with the name of the role and affixes it to his/her shirt, so it is visible to others, or else changes their name's appearance on camera. If practicing in physical space with other people, that player finds a place in the room and a shape that embodies the experience of that role in the system. Each player comes in, finds a place in relationship to the centre, the edge, and the other players. They may find it helpful to ask themselves, "Am I bigger, smaller, in the centre, to the side; do I feel powerful, weak and vulnerable?" Whatever it is, they embody it in the space so that others can see it. Remember not to act, but to empathize, identify with the role, and embody it.

3. Sculpture 1 – The current system:
   - Each person steps into their role.
   - Use your body to show how your role feels (e.g. slouched, stretched, tense).

- Say one sentence from that role's perspective: for instance “I feel invisible.”
- Reflect on the system’s current state.

4. Pause:
   - Let go of the posture.
   - Feel what needs to shift.

5. Sculpture 2 – The possible future:
   - Let your role move toward a better, more connected version. Listen to your body and adjust the posture accordingly.
   - Stop when it feels complete.
   - Say one sentence about the new state.
   - Space-holders can also reflect.

6. Group reflection:
   - *What changed?*
   - *Where did movement begin?*
   - *What surprised you?*
   - *What could this mean for real-life change?*

7. Step out of roles:
   - Acknowledge the role you played.
   - Leave behind what doesn’t belong to you.

c. Presencing phase Tools

MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION



Time: 2-10 minutes

What it is: This is a short, guided meditation to help people shift from being busy and active to a quieter, thoughtful state. It helps participants slow down, breathe, and connect with their deeper thoughts and feelings. This creates space for new ideas and perspectives to emerge.

Steps:

1. Write a short script before the session.
2. Ask participants to sit comfortably but upright.
3. Explain the purpose and how long the meditation will last.
4. Invite everyone to close their eyes and tune out external distractions.
5. Read the meditation slowly and clearly. Leave space for reflection and imagination.

PROTOTYPING



Time: Flexible

What it is: Prototyping is about testing out ideas in simple, early versions—like models, sketches, or mock-ups—so you can improve them. It helps to bring ideas to life quickly and see what works.

Steps:

1. Define your goal: What problem or question are you exploring?
2. Know your audience: Who will use or benefit from your idea?
3. Create a prototype: This could be a drawing, model, story, or role play.
4. Test it: Share it with others and get feedback.
5. Improve it: Make changes based on what you learned.
6. Try again: Keep testing and adjusting until it works well.
7. Put it into action: Use your improved prototype in real life.

STORYTELLING



Time: About 7-10 minutes per story, plus 15 minutes discussion at the end.

What it is: Storytelling exercises can be a powerful tool for reflection and learning in transformative methodologies. By encouraging individuals to share and reflect on their personal stories, these exercises can help individuals develop new insights and perspectives and ultimately promote personal growth and development. Most of us can identify an experience at some point of our lives when a sense of possibilities has opened up. Maybe we even acted upon those new possibilities. By sharing and reflecting on these stories, community members can develop a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives and work together more effectively to achieve common goals.

Steps:

1. Everyone thinks of a moment when they felt a purpose or a chance for new possibilities.
2. Each person shares their story without being interrupted.
3. After all the stories are shared, reflect as a group:

- *What stood out to you?*
- *What did you learn from others' stories?*
- *Did your own story feel different after hearing the others?*

INSPIRING VIDEOS/STORIES



Time: Depends on the length of the video

What it is: Choose among TED talks or other resources, a video or story that could inspire the team.

Sharing powerful videos or stories can energize community members by connecting them emotionally to sustainability goals. These narratives often present real-world challenges and innovative solutions, helping teams see what is possible and why their work matters. They can foster a sense of purpose, solidarity, and creativity, encouraging individuals to think beyond their immediate context and explore new approaches. When thoughtfully selected, such content can serve as a catalyst for dialogue, deepen commitment, and build a shared vision that sustains long-term engagement.

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION



Time: Flexible

What it is: Using art—like drawing, painting, writing, or sculpting—helps people express deeper thoughts and feelings that are hard to explain in words. It encourages creativity and opens people up to new perspectives.

Steps:

1. Choose your medium (drawing, collage, writing, photography, etc.).
2. Set an intention (e.g. What do I want to understand better?).
3. Create freely—focus on the process, not the outcome.
4. Reflect: What came up for you while creating?
5. Share with others: Show your work and listen to their feedback.
6. Repeat: You can do this exercise more than once to go deeper.

d. Co-creating phase Tools

PROTOTYPING LABS



Time: Depends on the scope and idea

What it is: Prototyping labs are spaces—physical or digital—where small groups work together to test out new ideas. Instead of planning everything perfectly, you start small, try things out quickly, and learn by doing.

Steps:

1. Form small, diverse teams with different skills and backgrounds.
2. Choose one idea that reflects the team's shared goal to work on.
3. Make a quick version (a draft, model, role-play, or test event).
4. Try it in real life—get feedback from real users or community members.
5. Reflect on what worked, what didn't, and how to improve it.
6. Repeat the cycle to improve the idea until it's ready to grow.

FEEDBACK LOOPS



Time: Ongoing

What it is: Feedback loops help you learn from others as you test and refine your ideas. The goal is to stay open to feedback and use it to improve.

Steps:

1. Share your idea or prototype with real users.
2. Ask open, honest questions: What worked for you? What didn't?
3. Listen actively and **don't defend**—just absorb.
4. Capture feedback in notes, photos, or recordings – reflect on this.
5. Adjust your idea based on what you have learned.

DESIGN THINKING



Time: Varies by activity

What it is: Design Thinking is a step-by-step approach for solving problems creatively. It's focused on understanding the people you're designing for and testing ideas early and often.

Steps:

1. Empathize: Talk to people and understand their needs.
2. Define: Be clear on the challenge you're solving.
3. Ideate: Brainstorm lots of ideas.
4. Prototype: Make a quick version of one idea.
5. Test: Share it with others and learn from their responses.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY



Time: 45-60 minutes

What it is: Instead of focusing on problems, Appreciative Inquiry focuses on what's working well—and how to do more of it. It builds energy and optimism.

Steps:

1. Ask: What are we proud of? What's already working?
2. Explore stories of success and meaning.
3. Discover strengths that can be scaled up.
4. Imagine the best future together.
5. Turn ideas into action plans.

COACHING CIRCLES



Time: 60–75 minutes

What it is: Small peer groups support each other in exploring real challenges. One person shares a case, and others listen deeply, reflect, and offer insights—without giving advice.

Steps:

1. Form a circle of 4–5 people.
2. One person shares a challenge (the case giver).
3. Others listen deeply, ask thoughtful questions, and reflect.
4. Together, the circle explores new perspectives.
5. Finish with personal takeaways and journaling.

e. Co-evolving phase Tools

ACTION PLANNING



Time: Depends on project scope.

What it is: Action planning is using Theory U to help participants develop a clear and actionable plan for achieving their goals. It involves a structured process of reflection, analysis, and decision-making to identify specific actions that will lead to the desired outcomes.

Steps:

1: Analyse the current situation

2: Generate ideas

3: Prioritize actions

4: Develop a plan of action

5: Implement the plan

THE CREATIVE TENSION EXERCISE



Time: Depends

What it is: The Creative Tension Exercise is a powerful problem-solving tool that helps individuals and teams identify the gap between their current reality and their desired future state. By following the steps below, you can effectively bridge this gap and create a plan for success:

Steps:

1. Describe the current situation in detail.

2. Define the desired future state

3.Identify the gap**:** Compare the current reality with the desired future state. What is the gap that needs to be bridged?

4.Generate ideas.

5. Develop a plan: Define the necessary steps, timeline, and resources needed to achieve the desired future state.

6. Act: Put the plan into action and monitor progress

SYSTEM ALLIGNMENT (FOR EVOLUTION)



Time: 1–2 hours

What it is: This is a visual way to understand the relationships, influences, and structures that shape your larger system. It helps you see patterns, tensions, and opportunities for evolution.

Steps:

1. Gather a group of people who have differing perspectives.
2. Identify key actors, institutions, forces, and feedback loops.
3. Map how things are connected (use arrows, circles, colors).
4. Discuss what holds the system in place—and what might shift it.
5. Highlight leverage points (where small changes can lead to big impacts).

REFLECTIVE HARVESTING



Time: 1–2 hours

What it is: Story harvesting collects and shares meaningful stories from your work. These stories help reflect on what happened, celebrate progress, and learn together.

Steps:

1. Invite people to share personal or project-related stories.
2. Use guiding questions to draw out insights (e.g. What changed? What was hard? What are we proud of?).
3. Listen deeply and note key themes, emotions, and outcomes.
4. Capture the stories through writing, audio, or video.
5. Share them with your team or community.

PEER LEARNING



Time: Ongoing

What it is: Sharing knowledge helps your insights travel across teams and communities. It creates a culture of openness, learning, and mutual support.

Steps:

1. Document your learnings clearly and simply.
2. Use visuals, summaries, and real examples.
3. Share through meetings, blogs, videos, or informal talks.
4. Invite feedback and contributions.
5. Make sharing knowledge a regular habit in your team or network.

f. Tools that apply to different U-steps

GUIDED JOURNALING: It applies in every U-step, especially in the early phases (co-initiating, co-sensing, co-presencing)



Time: A minimum of 45 minutes and up to 90 minutes, depending on the context.

What it is: The process of Reflective Journaling involves self-reflection through a series of journaling questions following the U-process. It is a tool for every step of the U-process, especially the early stages (initiating, sensing, presencing). Reflective Journaling follows certain principles, including writing first and then thinking, respecting privacy, and allowing for voluntary reflection on the experience (Scharmer, 2009).

The setup for reflective journaling can be used with groups of any size and requires a quiet space that provides each participant with privacy. The process should take a minimum of 45 minutes and up to 90 minutes, depending on the context. Each participant just needs a pen and paper.

The process of reflected journaling involves sharing what journaling means and then reading the suggested journaling questions. The questions should be adjusted to the language, focus, or culture of the group, but should still follow the U-Theory process. Participants are asked to reflect on their younger selves and what they want(ed) their life's footprint to be. They are also asked to imagine their highest future possibility and what they need to let go of, and take on, in order to bring their vision into reality.

Process:

Step 1: Preparation

Prepare a quiet space that allows each participant to enter a process of self-reflection without distractions.

Step 2: Reflected Journaling Questions

Read the first question; invite the participants to journal, guided by that question. After a few minutes of writing, read the next question. Go one by one through the questions. Move to the next question when you

sense that most of the group is ready. Don't give participants too much time. It is important to get into a flow and not to think too much. Instruct them to just write their response, not the question itself.

We have included a set of example questions for implementing the process.

1. *Over the past days, what have you noticed about your (emerging) self?*
2. *Who have been your "Guardian Angels" (helpers) in your life's journey so far?*
3. *Explore expectations: Where do you feel the future leads to in your life and work right now?*
4. *Frustration: What about your current work and/or personal life frustrates you the most?*
5. *Happiness: What are your most important sources of energy and happiness in your life and work?*
6. *Helicopter: Watch yourself from above (as if in a helicopter). What are you doing? What are you trying to do in this stage of your professional and personal journey?*
7. *Helicopter II: Watch your collective journey from above: what are you trying to do collectively in the present stage of your collective journey?*
8. *Given the above, what Questions do you now need to ask yourself?*
9. *Listen to your younger self: Look at your current situation from the viewpoint of yourself as a young person, at the beginning of your life journey: What does that young person have to say to your current self?*
10. *Footprint: Imagine you could fast-forward to the very last moments of your life, when it is time for you to pass on. Now look back on your life's journey as a whole. What would you want to see at that moment? What footprint do you want to leave behind on the planet?*
11. *From that future point of view: What advice do you give to your current self?*
12. *Now return again to considering the present and crystallize what it is that you want to create: your vision and intention for the next 3-5 years. What vision and intention do you have for yourself and your work? What are some essential core elements of the future that you want to create in your personal, professional, and social life? Describe or draw as concretely as possible the images and elements that occur to you…*
13. *Feel the connection with the larger global community of change makers present across the planet in this moment: What is our collective highest future possibility? What could we be an instrument for? What could we collectively create within the next 3-5 years?*
14. *Letting go: What would you have to let go of in order to bring your vision into reality? What is the old stuff that must die? What is the old skin (behaviours, assumptions, etc.) that you need to shed?*
15. *Prototyping: Over the next three months, if you were to prototype a microcosm of the future in which you could discover "the new" by doing something, what would that prototype look like?*
16. *People: Who can help you make your highest future possibilities a reality? Who might be your core helpers and partners?*
17. *Action: If you were to take on the project of bringing your intention into reality, what practical first steps would you take over the next 3 days?*

In summary, reflected journaling is a valuable tool for self-reflection and can be used in groups of any size. It follows the U-Theory process and requires a quiet space, pen, and paper for each participant. The process includes a series of journaling questions designed to prompt self-reflection and insight. Participants are encouraged to follow the principles of writing first, respecting privacy, and reflecting on the experience. The process ends with identifying core helpers and practical first steps in bringing their intention into reality.

LISTENING ASSESSMENT TOOL: It applies in every U-step



Time: -

What it is: One of the most underrated skills in leadership is listening. It is a fundamental aspect of great leadership, and a lack of it can often lead to failures. Therefore, it is an essential skill not only for professional mastery but also for personal growth. To enhance your listening abilities, practice deep listening regularly. One effective technique is to track your daily listening habits and increase your capacity to listen at different levels, depending on the situation. At the end of each day, take a moment to reflect on the quality of your listening, and use sliding bars to indicate the percentage of time you spent engaged in each level of listening.

The four different levels of listening are:

- Downloading: This is the most common level of listening, where people simply hear the words that are being said.
- Factual Listening: This level of listening involves paying attention to the facts and data being presented, and understanding the information being shared.
- Empathetic Listening: This level of listening involves trying to understand the feelings and emotions behind what is being said, and to connect with the speaker on a deeper level.
- Generative Listening: This is the highest level of listening, where individuals can listen deeply to the essence of what is being said, beyond the words and emotions, and to sense and intuit the possibilities and potential that lie within the situation.

EMPATHY WALKS*: It applies in every U-step



Time: 1-2 hours

What it is: Empathy Walks is a practice that can help individuals expand their capacity for empathy and build relationships across significant boundaries, especially between people with highly contrasting viewpoints or experiences. Developed by MIT Professor Emeritus Ed Schein (2009), a leading figure in organizational culture, learning, and leadership, this practice involves putting oneself in someone else's shoes and experiencing their perspective. The Empathy Walk

* a slightly different approach than the one presented before. Depending on when it is used, you can adapt accordingly.

is particularly useful in all Theory U processes, as it helps participants gain insight into the perspectives of those who are different from them.

To effectively practice Empathy Walks, it is essential to:

- Suspend judgment and practice empathetic listening (refer to the Listening Assessment Tool for a definition of empathetic listening).
- Step into the perspective of the other person and let go of preconceived notions and established mental models.
- Cultivate stillness and spaciousness throughout the conversation, allowing for a deeper understanding of the other person's perspective.

Process

Setup

- People: Individuals who are different from one another.
- Place: In person or through a video conference.
- Time: 1–2 hours.
- Materials: No materials are needed for this process.

Steps

Step 1: Contemplate Difference

Spend some time thinking about a world that is very different from yours and how the people living in it would be different from you. Be creative; let your imagination go. Brainstorm about the contexts and characteristics of 3 to 5 types of people that you could connect with within a week if you wanted to.

Step 2: Choose a Person

Now choose one of those people and figure out how to get in touch with them in the coming week. Is the person connected to you through your work? Is it someone you could reach through a family member, or through a friend?

Note: Be mindful of the difference in perceived power that might exist between you and the person you are contacting. Our interactions across differences like race and class are often shaped by a long legacy of injustice, pain, and trauma. Reaching out across these differences requires deep care and an understanding that a legacy of pain risks being hurtful to that person.

Step 3: Connect

- Contact this person, explain your intentions, and ask if they would be interested in a conversation with you. Be explicit about giving the person a gentle way out: the intention is to create an experience that holds value for you both, not just for you to extract knowledge.
- Schedule a meeting with the person. You can meet one on one. Or, if you are participating with a team, you can meet this person together, again with their permission.

- Through conversation, try to develop a sense of what it would be like to view the world from this person's perspective. How you go about this, what you say to the person, what length of time you actually spend, etc., is all up to you. There are no rules or guidelines. Be creative. The idea here is to go out into the world and practice empathy, relationship building, and deep listening with another person.

Step 4: Reflect after your conversation,

Write a reflective journal entry about what you experienced, how you felt, how you reacted, and what you learned.

PROJECTION MAPPING OR SPATIAL AUGMENTED REALITY TECHNIQUES (3D MODELLING):



Co-sensing phase-Co-creating phase

Time: Allow 60 minutes for the process and 20–40 minutes for the debrief, depending on group size. In addition, the facilitators need to set aside time to prepare the room

What it is: 3D modelling is a physical process that offers diverse perspectives on a situation or a system. In this collaborative exercise, an entire group constructs one or more sculptures that represent a current challenge. This induces questions from four different viewpoints, facilitating a 360-degree awareness of an emerging future. The power of this practice lies in the fact that participants rely on their hands rather than their habitual modes of thinking, leading to the discovery of novel insights. Regarding application, this tool can be used at any phase of Theory U to generate visual displays that explain projects and engage potential stakeholders. Moreover, the modelling technique can be implemented on any scale. The principles underlying 3D modelling include the creation of an external view of a current challenge to acquire insight from multiple perspectives into some of the systemic factors responsible for it. Additionally, it involves sensing, identifying, and activating inherent possibilities.

Process

Setup

- People: Groups (ideally not more than 5–8 people).
- Place: 3D Modelling is best done in person, though with some digital creativity can be adapted for virtual teleconferencing or meetings.
- Time: Allow 60 minutes for the process and 20–40 minutes for the debrief, depending on group size. In addition, the facilitators need to set aside time to prepare the room.
- Materials:
    - Small tables that allow the group to move around the model and view it from different sides. You could also build the sculpture on a large sheet of cardboard or a large cardboard box.
    - Journals or paper for taking notes.
    - 3D Modelling Kits for each group, with objects to represent different aspects of the system. We encourage you to source the kits sustainably, using materials that you already have. Examples of items to include are: pipe cleaners in different colours; items easily found in nature, such as

pinecones, stones, and twigs; playdough or clay; wool, string, and pieces of fabric; small figurines or toys.

- An assortment of materials is used to symbolically represent the system's forces at play. Anything can be made to represent anything.

Step 1: Orientation (~5 mins.)

- Introduce yourselves and choose a coach and notetaker.
- As a group set your intention what you want to focus on.

Step 2: Sculpt the Current Reality (~20 mins., assuming 3–5 team members)

- Co-create a model that represents the current situation or system that you want to transform.
- One person begins the sculpting process by placing an object on the surface and describing what it represents. Each team member then builds on this first step to co-create the sculpture. Pause between each addition to ensure that everyone understands what has been added and the relationships between the parts.
- Listen deeply to what each person says.

Step 3: Reflect from Four Directions (30–40 mins.)

Reflect on your model from four directions. The group begins on the east side of the sculpture. The coach reads a set of questions aloud, one by one, listening deeply as each person responds. The group then shifts to the next side of the sculpture. It is important to physically move, to experience multiple perspectives.

Questions:

1. EAST: Feeling

What do you love in this sculpture that ignites your best energy?

What frustrates you?

2. SOUTH: Truth

What hard truths need to be spoken?

3. WEST: Reflection

What assumptions might be underlying this situation?

What systemic barriers lock us into the current state of operating?

4. NORTH: Purpose/Presence

What in this situation is ending, wanting to die, and what is emerging, wanting to be born?

If this sculpture could speak, what advice might it offer?

Step 4: Adjust the Sculpture (~5 mins.)

Add, remove, and rearrange the objects—informed by each other's ideas—so that the sculpture better represents the emerging future you want to create.

Step 5: Wrap Up (~5 mins.)

What is the most important difference between sculpture 1 and sculpture 2?

What was the most important change that shifted the field from sculpture 1 to sculpture 2?

What might be the most important leverage points for practical next steps?

Each participant takes a few minutes to journal.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Theory U tools presented across the five core phases—Co-Initiating, Co-Sensing, Presencing, Co-Creating, and Co-Evolving—offer a powerful and practical pathway for meaningful change. Together, they provide a framework for engaging people at every level of a system, from deep individual reflection to collective action and systemic transformation. Each tool serves a unique purpose:

- Co-Initiating tools like Hosting and Network Mapping help build relationships and shared understanding.
- Co-Sensing tools such as Sensing Journeys and Dialogue create the space to explore real-world contexts and emotional insights.
- Presencing tools like Meditation, Storytelling, and Artistic Expression help individuals and groups pause, reflect, and connect with deeper sources of knowing.
- Co-Creating tools like Prototyping Labs and Coaching Circles enable small, actionable experiments and feedback-driven innovation.
- Co-Evolving tools such as Strategic Scaling, Story Harvesting, and System Mapping help scale solutions while keeping learning, adaptation, and shared purpose at the core.

By guiding users to listen deeply, act intentionally, and adapt collaboratively, Theory U tools promote not just technical solutions, but also cultural and relational shifts. They foster environments where people feel heard, empowered, and connected to a greater sense of purpose. Whether used in community initiatives, organizational change, or public policy, these tools are accessible, adaptable, and rooted in lived experience. Their real power lies in their ability to bring people together across divides, hold space for complexity, and support learning through doing. In short, Theory U is not just a method—it is a mindset. The tools offered in this guide help put that mindset into practice, turning insight into impact in service of a more conscious and co-created future.

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7. GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Theory U

A framework for leading change that emphasizes deep listening, co-creation, and transformation.

Co-initiating

The first stage in Theory U, where a shared intention and trust among stakeholders is formed.

Co-sensing

The second stage in Theory U; it involves collective exploration and understanding of the current reality from multiple perspectives.

Presencing

A term combining 'presence' and 'sensing'; it means connecting to the deepest source of inspiration and will to enable change. Also the third stage in Theory U.

Co-creating

The fourth stage in Theory U where ideas are prototyped and tested collaboratively to bring about systemic change.

Co-evolving

The final stage of Theory U; sustaining and scaling successful innovations and practices.

Crystallizing a Vision

Clarifying and aligning on a collective future goal, based on deep shared insights.

Prototyping

Creating small-scale, testable versions of ideas to learn and improve them before large-scale implementation.

Polycentric Governance

A system of governance with multiple decision-making centers that operate independently but also coordinate.

Social-Ecological Systems

Interconnected systems of human society and ecological environments that influence each other.

Mental Models

Deeply held beliefs and assumptions that shape how individuals perceive the world and take subsequent action.

Empathy Walks

An exercise in which participants adopt different perspectives to build mutual understanding and insight.

Sensing Journeys

Experiential visits that are designed to gain deeper insights into community or environmental issues through direct observation.

Reflective Journaling

A practice of structured self-reflection, using guided questions to enhance awareness and learning.

Listening Levels

The four levels of listening in Theory U: Downloading, Factual, Empathetic, and Generative listening.

Action Research

A participatory and iterative research method used to solve problems and improve practices through action and reflection.

Social Capital

The networks, norms, and trust that enable individuals and groups to work together effectively.

Creative Tension

The gap between current reality and a desired future state, used as a source of motivation and innovation.

Stakeholder Mapping

A process for identifying and analyzing individuals or groups who are affected by or can affect a project.