8 Conclusions

in which I summarise the features which contribute robustness to facilitation processes, identify my contribution to knowledge, nominate possible further developments, and finally reflect on the explication and its personal significance for me

In this last chapter I offer some final thoughts and reflections. In turn I offer some additional thoughts on robust processes, summarise the contribution to knowledge in this explication and the accompanying documents, look ahead to my probable future theory and practice, and then reflect on the process of preparing this thesis.

Robust processes

The glimpse of process facilitation in these pages only partly captures the flexibility and artistry (and for that matter, the excitement) of skilled facilitation. My aim in much of my writing is to make process visible and accessible — to capture on paper the ideas and the processes that can be useful for novices and skilled practitioners alike. In my practice my aim is to help other people to become aware enough of process and excited enough by it to use it skilfully in their work.

As I have said, experienced facilitators are able to plug gaps in a description from their own experience, or otherwise expand on a description. Novices may not have the experience to do so.

Novices benefit from having robust processes. It is helpful if the processes are as fail-safe as possible. It is desirable that when stretched beyond their limits the processes degrade gracefully. As well, the processes have to be simple enough to be able to be memorised and recalled. At the same time they have to be complex enough to do justice to situations which are sometimes anything but simple.

It is issues such as these which the present document has explored. I have presented and analysed a sample of my past writing. As I have done so I have compared it to my live experience as a facilitator. With the benefit of hindsight I have identified some of the ways in which the tensions between theory and

practice can be reconciled. I have sought to discover and to show how theories and models of process can nevertheless be useful, including for novices.

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In chapter 3 I presented some ideas on theory and its place. In other chapters I have addressed processes for learning, change and research. Almost as if they were isolated families of processes I have explored each separately, in chapters 4, 5 and 6 respectively.

By now it is apparent, I hope, that the separation is artificial. Learning and change and research (in some form) are all present to some extent in almost all of the processes I have described. Learning and change and research for the most part are not separate endeavours. Rather, they are different perspectives from which process facilitation can be examined. They are different windows to look through, you might say.

Throughout, twin themes have emerged. One is robustness. It is about the shape of processes which enable them to be used with more confidence. The other is flexibility. It is about the inevitable tension identified above, between live performance on the one hand and theories and models and ideas and descriptions on the other.

Contribution to knowledge

I believe that a substantial contribution to knowledge (and to practice) is evidenced in this explication and the accompanying documents. Summarised from chapter 1, here are some examples of the contributions documented:

- Processes for change-oriented and robust data collection and interpretation
  - convergent interviewing

- structured focus groups
- group feedback analysis

■ Processes for resolving conflict or improving relationships

- conflict management
- option 1.5 ("option one and a half")
- an approach to team building
- personal history trip (with Tim Dalmau)

■ Processes and concepts for cultural diagnosis and change (with Tim Dalmau)

- history trip
- discussing the undiscussable
- a diagnostic model

■ and various other intervention processes which include

- search (a visioning process)
- the Snyder evaluation process
- numerous other processes not explicitly mentioned here but scattered throughout the thesis and the accompanying documents

■ theoretical contributions

- a "dialectic engine" for data collection and analysis
- the information chain
- the concept of "metaprocess"
- an account of how practitioner and other theories can be related
- the concept (and process) of escalating interventions
- the concept (and process) of making the process visible
- the concept of strategic concepts
- the freedom within limits model.

There are also the many concepts accompanying the process contributions mentioned above, and the final description of the dimensions of process robustness in chapter 7.

Let me also point out that this categorisation into interventions and concepts conceals the integration of theory and practice which characterises almost all of these contributions.

It would be pleasing if you have also been able to glimpse, behind and beyond the words you have read, something of the flexible and complex performance that facilitation is.

Where now?

I am currently working on two areas of theory and practice which I've largely omitted from this thesis. So far there are limited publications on each, partly because I often use material in practice for some time before I feel confident to document it usefully.

Action research and complexity. I suspect that some of the upsurge of interest in action research arises from the growing complexity of human activity systems. Action research can have the flexibility and responsiveness to deal with the unexpected that complexity brings. I've been applying complexity models and processes in practice. I find that they are useful in a large range of situations, I suspect because all human activity systems have the capacity to become complex or chaotic.

Theory development in action research. The literature on theory building in action research is scattered and meagre. The usual forms of the action research cycle typically omit the theory building made explicit in experiential learning cycles. [1] There are hints in this thesis of how further development might

proceed, for instance in making the theory building more explicit. There is more work to do on the material on theory in chapter 3. There are applications of Argyris's theory-of-action approach which could be further documented.

In addition, although I am by inclination a theorist I am by profession a practitioner. Further, as I've mentioned, for me practice often precedes theory. I expect to continue to facilitate learning, change, and very applied research. As I do so I expect my practice to develop in the future as it has in the past.

A final reflection

It seems that whatever I write is out of date as I write it. The act of reflection and writing changes my perception of what I am doing and thinking. So I expect that preparation of this explication and the related documents has enhanced my future development. This is not a new realisation for me. However, preparation of this thesis has sharpened my realisation of my personal and professional development.

There have been some surprises in reading some of the earlier of the accompanying documents. I have often rediscovered hints in early documents of what became more fully developed ideas in later documents. In a couple of instances I've rediscovered ideas or processes which I had largely forgotten through neglect.

Though I have continued to ply my trade, preparing this thesis obliged me to set aside larger blocks of time for reading and thinking and writing than I otherwise would have done. This has been both valuable and enjoyable. One of the outcomes of this work is a determination to continue taking more time to read, think and write. I have always made a practice of reflecting on my activities.

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1.   In Kolb (1974) the relevant phase in the cycle is termed "abstract conceptualisation".

The additional reading and thinking and writing has enriched the results of the reflection.

I said a few paragraphs ago that writing something immediately renders it out of date. This has been true of this thesis. Thoughts have been started, and it is hard to know where they will next take me.

There came a time when I said (with some encouragement from others) that it was time to draw a line and say of this explication, this is enough for now. The line is arbitrary, of course. Those matters I've discussed here don't come to an end just because the thesis has. I've enjoyed the journey so far. I look forward to it continuing.