Going Beyond ‘Getting it Right’ in a Mindfulness Organization with Theory U

April McClellan

Final Report presented in partial fulfillment
of requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (Human Systems Intervention)

Presented to Gilbert Emond, Ph.D.
Department of Applied Human Sciences
Concordia University

August 2014
Abstract

This case study presents an integrated application of Theory U, Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Process Consulting, in a project with an emerging advocacy organization for mindfulness in education, who is looking to create new capabilities in volunteer engagement. The researcher proposes that the organization is hampered by an imbalance between ‘planning and acting’, with mostly planning occurring from a ‘getting it right’ versus ‘getting it done’ mindset, and ‘leading and following’, with primarily one leader and many followers. The primary goal of the project is to transcend the organizational dynamics that have them ‘stuck’ in relative inaction and to create space for more leaders and more action. Theory U was selected for its relevance to the client’s context, as a structured and mindful transformational leadership process focused on emergence. PAR was selected for its relevance to the project goals given its intentions of creating inclusion, democracy, empowerment and community. Process Consulting was chosen as the consulting and facilitation method of helping a system to ‘help itself’, and as the chosen mindful ‘here and now’ approach of the researcher. The project team’s descent and ascent through the ‘U process’ resulted in the creation of new leaders for the organization and the emergence of a new entity, the Volunteer Engagement Committee, complete with its own values, vision and mission aligned with the overall organization, and its own action-oriented project, moving the organization beyond ‘getting it right’ to ‘getting it done’. The study concludes that due to the positive results, positive feedback from the project team, and the common links of reflection, action, mindfulness, transformation, and empowerment between Theory U, PAR and Process Consulting, that the integrated approach was relevant and effective in an emerging mindfulness organization.
Keywords: Theory U; Participatory Action Research; Process Consulting; Human System Interventions; Buddhism; Mindfulness; Middle Way; Non-Dualism.
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Praxis and General Approach</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Case Organization</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entering the Case Organization</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Mindfulness?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanning the System</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Issues</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory U</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposing Theory U as a Methodology</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory U Defined</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Project Design</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Project Team</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The U-Process</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Structure</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Observations</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Initiation: Meeting # 1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Sensing: Meeting # 2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Presencing: Meeting # 3</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Co-Creating: Meeting #4 - Crystallizing ................................................................. 32

Co-Creating: Meeting #5 - Prototyping ................................................................. 34

Summary ..................................................................................................................... 36

Reflection on my own process .................................................................................... 36

Discussion .................................................................................................................. 38

Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 43

References .................................................................................................................. 45
Going Beyond ‘Getting it Right’ in a Mindfulness Organization with Theory U

The series of cases to be examined in this paper were undertaken as part of an action research and Process Consulting project led by the author, in fulfillment of her Master of Arts degree in Human Systems Intervention at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The primary case is an emerging, volunteer-run advocacy organization for mindfulness in education, and the story of their inquiry into Theory U’s (Scharmer, 2007) central questions – ‘who is my/our self?’; ‘what is my/our work?’ and ‘what is required in order to learn and act from the future as it emerges?’. Woven throughout the primary case is the secondary case of the researcher and author, and her parallel process of descending and ascending the ‘U’ alongside her clients in the act of becoming a Process Consultant and Participatory Action Researcher.

The primary research question to be explored in this paper, is the relevance of applying a combination of Theory U (a mindfulness-based approach), Process Consulting and Participatory Action Research (PAR) in a mindfulness-focused organization. Since mindfulness originates in Buddhism, the synergies between mindfulness, Buddhism and Theory U will be explored in a discussion of the process of inquiry into the client’s presenting problem.

Praxis and General Approach

As a Master’s student in Human Systems Intervention learning the methodology of Process Consulting, my intentions for this project, were to apply and build my Process Consulting skills and to apply the values, principles and practices of PAR. I consider these two methodologies to constitute a significant part of my ethical praxis as an organizational development consultant at this time.

Process Consulting “is the creation of a relationship with the client to perceive, understand and act on the process events that occur in the client’s internal and external
environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client” (Schein, 1999, p. 20) with the philosophy that “one can only help a human system to help itself” (Schein, 1999, p.1).

Process consultants attempt to live by the following principles: ‘always try to be helpful’, ‘always stay in touch with the current reality’, ‘access your ignorance’, ‘everything you do is an intervention’, ‘the client owns the problem and the solution’, ‘go with the flow’, ‘timing is critical’, and ‘everything is data’ (Schein, 1999, p. 60).

PAR is a social process of research ‘with’ people rather than ‘on’ people (Heron & Reason, 2001) that is reflexive, critical, emancipatory, participatory, collaborative and practical (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). PAR comes in many forms, but fundamental to PAR is the critique of the ‘myth of objective science’, and in valuing subjectivity, participation and context, it has historically been aligned with revolutionary movements (Swantz, 2013). PAR is geared towards utilizing the practice of research as an agent of transformational change in communities by directly involving community members with learning, planning, designing solutions and acting on a focus of ‘immediate interest’ to the local population (Swantz, 2013).

Contributing to my praxis, is my desire to be a ‘reflective practitioner’. Schon (1983) describes a ‘reflective practitioner; as the kind of researcher who develops skills in self-awareness amounting to ‘reflecting-in-action’, and ‘reflecting-on-action’ towards their own practice of research. My goal as a reflective practitioner is to embody the interdependence of research and practice, and to transcend dualistic thinking that keeps research and practice separate. By doing so, I hope to gain greater clarity in where I may be helping or hindering myself and my work with clients by reflecting on myself and my actions as a whole system.

In locating a client for this project, my intention was to look for clients with whom I felt aligned, and where my basic approach with Process Consulting and PAR would be mutually
beneficial. I focused on community organizations doing work that aimed to create a thriving, healthy, just and sustainable world. To present myself to prospective organizations I developed a ‘marketing’ presentation to introduce myself, my values, intentions and general approach. Figure 1 shows an example of an articulation of my desired approach with clients.

![My Approach](image)

*Figure 1- Researcher’s presentation of consulting approach to prospective clients*

Further to Figure 1, I described Process Consulting and PAR to potential clients, and proposed that myself and a group of individuals engage in a collaborative co-inquiry and co-discovery into what may be helping or hindering the organization in reaching its goals. I suggested several areas that such a project might inquire into, such as visioning, capacity building, and community engagement.

My general process in working with a client would begin with contracting to determine a focus for the project and our terms of engagement, to complete a scan of the system to learn about who it was and how it operated, and to inquire into the chosen focus, or to help determine
a focus for the project. The scan would help me to define what I perceived as key issues which would help me to determine what methodologies or theories might inform the approach I might take. Once an approach was determined, the project plan would be created and vetted with the client, a project team and schedule would be created, and together myself and the project team would engage in executing the project plan, and adjusting our approach as required by the project team.

The Case Organization

To preserve the relative confidential identity of the organization and the project participants, it shall be referred to throughout as the ‘Mindfulness Education Organization’ (MEO). The following is a representation and analysis of my own experience and perceptions, or misperceptions as they may be, as a Master’s student engaging on her first solo Process Consulting and PAR project, while learning and applying Theory U.

Entering the Case Organization

Although I was looking for a client for my project at the time, I came across MEO in an unrelated search for Buddhist sanghas (communities of practice) where I might explore my own growing interest in Buddhist thought and practice. I initiated contact with the ED of MEO via an email that included the introductory presentation and stated “I am looking for non-profit organizations who are focused on social wellness, and who are interested in collaborating in a pro-bono consulting engagement focused on organizational development to build capacity and impact” (personal e-mail, Jan. 2014). I received an energetic response from the ED that same day and proceeded with a phone conversation the following day. In our initial call, the ED identified his primary issue as a ‘lack of resources’ which meant that ‘he is doing everything’
(ED personal communication, Jan 2014). He identified administrative needs and technical support for the website as critical and stated that he was looking for ‘self-starters’. Around fifty people had already indicated they would like to volunteer for MEO, and the ED shared that he wasn’t sure how to engage them. He had earlier created several committees but they were just not garnering the activity he felt was needed. The ED was keen to ‘get some help’ and was ‘cautiously optimistic’ about engaging in a project with myself, while cautioning that he felt it might be hard to sell ‘process improvement’ to the Board.

**Formation**

MEO was founded in the summer of 2013, when attendees of a mindfulness education conference held by a well-known Buddhist monk were invited to unite to pursue the goal of integrating mindfulness into the elementary and high school curriculums of a Canadian province. The founder and Executive Director (ED) of MEO, was the lead organizer of this conference from which MEO emerged. The seed for MEO had been developing in the ED’s mind for several years before it sprouted roots in the conference. In our initial conversations, he spoke of the genesis of his vision, which included scanning the education system for mindfulness program readiness, networking with individuals involved in developing and delivering mindfulness programs for schools, and recruiting knowledgeable and connected members for the Board of this organization. The ED created a Board comprised of individuals who have extensive experience in creating and delivering mindfulness curriculum and training in schools and organizations. Two Board members are founders and current ED’s of separate non-profits that create and deliver fee-based mindfulness certification, training and workshops. Additionally, there is a vice-principal experienced in implementing a mindfulness program in a school, and an individual with decision-making level knowledge and experience of provincial policies in child
mental health program design and delivery. In addition to his goal of integrating mindfulness into school curriculums, he spoke of his larger goal to influence human thinking to create societal change regarding our current unsustainable behavior towards our planet. As a practicing Buddhist, he shared that his vision for MEO as a secular organization, was related to a similar Buddhist organization in another country that was created by his teacher, the well-known monk previously mentioned.

In the fall of 2013, MEO held its first public strategy and planning meeting in a large Canadian city. The 80 attendees, including teachers from all levels of education, mental health professionals, mindfulness educators and practitioners, and interested others, were introduced to the Board. Planning meeting attendees heard that the Board and ED wished to join with them in creating a community where teachers, educators and others would share tools to champion mindfulness practices in education to help improve mental wellness in schools. A call was made for volunteers and up to eight committees were tentatively established, aligned with MEO’s strategies as defined by the ED and Board. For example, one committee focused on strategies for integrating mindfulness in elementary schools, one focused on developing a ‘Program Guide’ of available mindfulness training and education programs and another focused on the task of defining the current state of mindfulness programs in the schools.

What is Mindfulness?

It is helpful to understand the focus of MEO’s work, particularly in understanding my choice of Theory U (to be discussed later) as a guiding framework for this project. Mindfulness is just one component of a comprehensive Buddhist worldview that has become known for its positive impact on mental health. Scientist Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of the internationally renowned and evidence-based mental health program called ‘Mindfulness-Based Stress
Reduction’ (MBSR), which MEO is an advocate of, offers a secular and Western perspective on mindfulness. Mindfulness is “a practical way to be more in touch with the fullness of your being through a systematic process of self-inquiry, self-observation and mindful action…[and] provides a simple but powerful route to getting ourselves unstuck” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

From a Buddhist perspective, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) describes mindfulness as a form of training aimed at developing the ‘right’ kind of attention, attention that is focused on the ‘here and now’ to achieve a present-moment awareness. If one is able to develop the ‘right’ kind of attention, then one will be able to do the ‘right’ kind of actions, since in the Buddhist view, without mindfulness, we all live in a dream world of delusion based on our mental projections, perceptions and interpretations. In Buddhism, the term ‘right’ refers to eight principles (right view, right thinking, right mindfulness, right speech, right action, right diligence, right concentration, and right livelihood) of the Buddhist Eight-Fold Path. This path guides practitioners to practice mindfulness in ways that are said to lead to the end of suffering, which is the overarching Buddhist spiritual goal, and is similar to MEO’s goal to support mental wellness in schools. The simplest practice of mindfulness meditation is the exercise of turning one’s focus directly on to the breath and taking note, without judgment, of what has drawn your attention away from your breath, and then simply returning focus to your breath. As one regularly practices mindfulness meditation, the skills of concentration and discipline are being developed as a foundation for developing insight and clarity.

Scanning the System

The ED had several ideas for a project focus, but decided to involve the members of the organization in determining what the best focus might be, while specifically referring to the participatory principles of PAR that I had introduced him to. We agreed that I would do an
“environmental scan”, which is a high to medium level inquiry into who the system is, for example vision, mission, culture and values; how the system operates, for example processes, roles, and tasks; the system boundaries, for example, internal structures and external organizations, as well as organizational members thoughts on all of the above. I spoke to seven individuals representing a range of the people interested and/or involved with the organization. The individuals included board members and people who had attended a committee meeting, the first public meeting or the initiating conference. The questions asked were as follows:

- What motivated you to become involved with MEO?
- In your opinion what is the purpose of MEO?
- What are the outcomes or impact you hope that MEO can achieve?
- What is your knowledge of the organizational structure of MEO so far?
  - How do you see your role as a board member, volunteer, member, participant etc.
- What do you think would be the most helpful focus for this project at this time?
  - What would make this project a success for you?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Without exception, everyone I spoke to was a firm believer in the benefits of mindfulness for mental health and was a strong supporter of the need for mindfulness programs in schools to help students with problems like bullying, anxiety, depression and stress. There were two main purposes and impact that interviewees felt MEO could have: to be a support and resource for teachers to help them build their own skills to champion mindfulness in their schools, and to be an advocate in promoting best practices in mindfulness in education. Everyone seemed aligned with the mission of the organization to bring mindfulness and mental wellness to schools. All but one of the people I interviewed were longtime mindfulness practitioners who had personally benefitted from meditation and were also interested in furthering their own mindfulness knowledge, practice and personal growth.
Given my background in organizational development, I was interested in how they organized themselves. Interviewees described the structure of the organization as “vague”, “loose”, “informal”, “ad hoc” and “not terribly well-organized” while acknowledging that the organization was in its infancy. The ‘organization’ itself did not have an official legal status such as non-profit or charitable. The management structure in MEO consisted of the Executive Director and Board Members. The Board was a working Board and there was no charter defining specific roles or responsibilities. The work they had already defined was being tackled in parts by the ED and some of the board members. Although they had a list of people interested in volunteering, there wasn’t a process or structure in place to recruit, manage or assign authority to individuals to engage them in working for MEO.

Interviewees felt that there were not enough ‘clearly defined projects’, and given individuals’ available time for MEO was limited, they needed something ‘concrete and specific to align with’. People were primarily looking for the ED to provide this direction, and were confident that the ED was ‘at the helm’, ‘spearheading the vision and the strategic plan’. Some felt that they should have a clear understanding of their environment, and a detailed plan, before acting, while others also had ideas about which direction to take and were ready to ‘get going’.

In Process Consulting, ‘timing is critical’ and ‘everything is an intervention’ (Schein, 1999), so I was struck by the serendipity of my timing in contacting this organization that was looking for concrete projects, when I had a project to ‘sell’, and the similarity of my own context as a new process consultant to MEO’s ‘newness’. I felt positive about PAR’s democratic approach as a suitable and relevant way to create an actionable space for those interested in fulfilling MEO’s mission. Involving community members in discovery and planning is fundamental to the democratic approach of PAR, and in asking the interviewees for their
opinions of a suitable focus for my project with MEO, I was able to honor PAR’s democratic values. The interviewees offered a range of ideas for a project focus which generally aligned with their particular interest, whether it be a teacher who felt that providing training for teachers was a priority and that the project could help with teacher education strategies, mindfulness educators looking to understand the current state of mindfulness in the schools, or Board members and committee participants who felt that structures, processes and tool for engaging people and increasing participation were a priority and perhaps the project could help with visioning and understanding MEO’s community needs. Due to the feedback I received during the scan that indicated there were several people who were motivated to actively participate in a concrete project for MEO, the large number (more than 50) of people who had already offered to volunteer for MEO, the sizeable turnout (60-80) at MEO’s public meetings, and given the organization’s grassroots origins, I felt confident that there would be a sufficient group of people willing to participate in a PAR project.

**Key Issues**

With the ED’s perceived presenting problem in mind, that is, a lack of ‘help’ to take action on the tasks he and the Board planned, which resulted in him ‘doing everything’, I developed a model (Figure 2) of my perception of the current state of engagement in MEO via feedback from the interviewees. I saw an imbalance between planning and action, with a ‘big picture’ strategic planning occurring and not as much ‘concrete’ action - and an imbalance between leading and following, with a strong sense of people waiting for direction from the ED, while asking questions like ‘what is my role?’ I perceived divided thinking in how to move forward, one attitude being to ‘wait and see’ where we are first so we can ‘get it right’, i.e. plan
first, act later - and the other being to just start “where we are now” and ‘get some quick wins’, i.e. act and then plan.

Considering these perceived dynamics from an Action Research perspective, which can be described as a spiral of iterative steps of reflection (‘look’ and ‘think’) and action (‘act’) (Stringer, 2007), it seemed as if MEO was spiraling between ‘look’ and ‘think’, and largely occupied with reflection. The context, as described earlier, was a loosely structured and emergent collective rallied around MEO’s vision to spread mindfulness to schools and a single communication and control point, the ED.

My proposal (Figure 3) was to balance the planning and acting, by also trying to balance the leading and following by creating more leaders who could create and act on concrete tasks. Given that “organizations work the way humans create them” (Scharmer, 2007, p.54), this
engagement dynamic was, in my mind, a ‘dilemma of its own making’ (Argyris, 2006, p.171), dilemmas which Argyris suggests are effective points of intervention.

![Project Proposal - Vision](image)

*Figure 3- Author's proposal for the project goal and vision as presented to MEO*

My proposal resonated with the ED, and subsequently he and the Board settled on a focus of ‘volunteer engagement’ for this project, a focus which aligned with the original problem presented by the ED that he was doing all the work and was looking for ways to engage potential volunteers. There was some opposition to this project moving forward at all, with the opinion given that volunteer engagement required considerable thought and time to ‘get it right’ – interestingly, ‘getting it right’ versus ‘getting it done’ in MEO were two extremes of planning and acting seen during my scan.
Theory U

Proposing Theory U as a Methodology

I searched for a method that would be relevant to my client’s context as emerging mindfulness advocates, who have a need to generate active involvement of volunteers, and where mindfulness itself might be a tool for change. Theory U, created by Otto Scharmer (2007), is a transformational change and planning process that seeks to bring the future that is waiting to emerge into the present, ‘here and now’. Theory U is itself a mindful process – training one’s attention to be present in the ‘here and now’ is one goal of mindfulness – and I felt it would align with the client’s worldview and the nature of their work. The mindful reflective inquiry components of Theory U might be said to align with the ‘look’ and ‘think’ components of action research. The ‘act’ component of action research is also addressed by Theory U which is a participatory design and action planning process, thus Theory U is geared towards both reflection and action, I felt it would help the potential project team to co-create the conditions of their work with MEO, and design and take action on the more concrete tasks requested during the environmental scan. Not only did it seem well-suited for MEO and their context, it matched parts of my ethical praxis and desired way of working. For example, Theory U is also based on Process Consulting (Schein, 1999), Action Research (Lewin, 1946), Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and Systems Thinking (Katz & Kahn, 1978), all of which are methodologies I was familiar with as a student of Human Systems Intervention.

Theory U Defined

Theory U is a process that comprises a set of five evolutionary stages (Figure 4) designed to guide participants in training their attention to gain awareness and insight into individual and organizational blind spot(s), and to ‘let go’ of patterns and habits that are no longer valuable,
while developing a collective presence in the ‘here and now’ to ‘let come’ the best and highest possible future that is trying to emerge.

Figure 4- Theory U Stages -source: Maak Ruimte (2014)

Success in navigating the ‘U’ is enhanced by achieving three desired states of mind in a particular order – having an ‘open mind’, ‘open heart’, and ‘open will’. A “blind spot”, central to Scharmer’s model, is an unseen inner source from which individuals and organizations operate, that impairs collective awareness of how to move forward in achieving our best selves. Like mindfulness meditation at an individual level, Theory U leads organizations through a process of training the skill of attention, including awareness of where one’s attention is focused (‘self’, ‘other’, ‘subject’, ‘object’, ‘whole’), and the conscious and non-judgmental shifting of
attention. The thought is that where the attention lies, is from where our actions occur, and if our actions are occurring from our ‘blind spot’, then we are blind to our own behaviors, as individuals, groups and as organizations.

In the first stage, ‘Co-Initiation’, the group comes together to determine a common set of intentions, and to begin looking at the organization from within, so that they might ‘download past patterns’ which is the process of becoming aware of habits and behaviors that need to be ‘let go’ of. This stage means to interrupt the habitual patterns of thinking and acting that cause an organization to be blind to its own current reality. An obstacle to gaining awareness of these habits and patterns is using a ‘voice of judgment’ when looking inward. Suspending this judgmental voice helps the organization to approach this stage with an ‘open mind’ and to ‘see with fresh eyes’.

The second stage, ‘Co-Sensing’, is all about seeing and sensing from as many angles as possible. It is about observation and data gathering and connecting with the system and its people. Here, one is asked to access an ‘open heart’ and suspend the interfering ‘voice of cynicism’ that would have you not see the possibilities while redirecting the attention from seeing the organization (or self) from within, to looking inwards at the whole organization from the edge of its boundaries, and then to looking outwards to the larger system. “When a group starts to operate from such a place, its participants also begin to see their relationship to the system and how they collectively enact it” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 147). Co-initiation and Co-sensing are meant to provide participants with enough knowledge and experience of the system they are inquiring into, to prepare them for ‘Presencing’ and to determine what blind spots may exist indicating what needs to be ‘let go’ of.
Presencing, the third stage, is a particularly mindful stage where the group comes to a place of silence to collectively reflect upon everything they have heard and seen, and to determine what is inessential for moving towards and enacting the future that is calling out to them. Obstacles to achieving presence include the ‘voice of fear’, and by using mindfulness practices to suspend this fear, the group may access its ‘open will’ to act. This step is also known as ‘going through the eye of the needle’ which is the door leading from the past to the future of the organization. In this stage the group’s attention is focused at all points of reference of the system: from the individual ‘selves’, to the organizational ‘self’, to looking at the organization as an ‘other’ from its boundaries, and then to the larger system of which the organization is a part.

The fourth stage is called ‘Co-Creating’ and involves ‘crystallizing’ the group’s vision for the future, as they have ‘let go’ of the past and are ‘letting come’ the future. “On this level our work focuses on getting our (old) self out of the way, in order to open a space, a clearing, that allows for a different sense of presence to manifest” (Scharmer, 2007, p. 165). The group is challenged to ‘crystallize’ their vision for the future and to create ‘prototypes’ of the future - small experimental tasks or projects which they commit to taking action on with the mindset of ‘fail fast to learn early’.

Co-evolving, the fifth stage, is about extending the prototypes they have explored to an institutional scale, creating sustainable processes, embodying their new whole ‘self’, and performing actions for the organization from an awareness of their interdependence within a larger ecosystem.
The Project Team

The project team was formed when nine people volunteered for the project at one of MEO’s public meetings, after I presented the key issues and my proposal to use Theory U to approximately 60 attendees. Their public meetings were the primary form of engagement for MEO at the time, and were where people gathered to learn about and share best practices around teaching mindfulness in schools. The project team consisted of elementary and high school teachers and librarians, mindfulness educators, mindfulness practitioners and former corporate managers interested in improving mental health in schools. As a newly formed group, many were meeting or volunteering with MEO for the first time. The team included the founder and ED, while there were no other Board members participating in the project directly.

The U-Process

The project was designed to evolve, over four months, through four of the five stages of the Theory U process (co-initiating, co-sensing, presencing, co-creating), in order to prepare MEO to move into the fifth stage, co-evolving, on their own. Figure 4 shows the alignment of each meeting with the various stages. There were five meetings in total, each scheduled for three hours. There were four reasons that I designed the flow to prepare the client to move through ‘co-evolving’ on their own. First, time was a constraint for all parties. Second, my goal, as a PAR researcher was to create a container to empower the group to make their own change. Third, my proposal was to create more leaders in MEO, and I did not want to create a dependency on myself as a leader of this project. Fourth, as a process consultant, I was adhering to Schein’s (1999) Process Consulting principle that ‘the client owns the problem and the solution’ and my
intention was to use Theory U as a ‘mindful’ model to help then to design their own processes and actions at an institutional level.

A survey was planned to occur between Co-initiation (Meeting 1) and Co-Sensing (Meeting 2) in order to supply the team with a means of observing their system by hearing from its members. When I vetted the project design with the ED, we decided on using a survey for this step, due to the expected time constraints, and the relative simplicity of delivering online survey, versus running a focus group or scheduling and transcribing multiple interviews.

![Meeting Alignment with Theory U Steps](image)

**Figure 5- Project meeting alignment with Theory U steps - adapted from Thinkthru (2014)**

**Meeting Structure**

The structure of each meeting was informed by an inquiry process based on co-operative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001). An inquiry process aids in strategic thinking and design by generating multiple perspectives based on the participants’ knowledge and experience, which supports PAR’s democratic and empowerment principles, and is an iterative process consisting of two steps, action and reflection. The reflection step has individuals or groups creating inquiry
questions and reflecting upon them, while the action step has individuals or groups deciding on and taking action, and subsequently reflecting upon those actions once complete…and so on. My intention in using this process in each meeting was to model an iterative approach that included ‘looking’, ‘thinking’ and ‘acting’ (as in action research) to help address the imbalance I had seen where MEO seemed to be caught in a reflective ‘looking’ and ‘thinking’ spiral. Inquiry is aligned with Theory U, which embeds the central inquiries, ‘who is my/our self?’, ‘what is my/our work?’, and ‘what is required in order to learn and act from the future as it emerges?’ throughout its process. The initial and focal inquiry question for this project overall was “how can MEO actively engage its members as volunteers?”

A mixture of individual, small and large group activities were planned for each meeting in order to support reflection and action at multiple levels. A regular reflective activity included at the start of each meeting was a check-in inquiry, for example, “how are you arriving today?”, followed by a group reflection inquiry on the previous meetings, for example, “what stands out for you so far in our process…any strengths, challenges, changes required?”

My own process of reflection and action included; reflecting on the meeting results during and between each meeting, reflection on the process design, and considering the group’s feedback, dialogue and dynamics. When relevant, an intervention was designed based on my reflections, for example, ‘myths of volunteering’ described in the meeting observations below.

In keeping with Theory U’s mindful approach and the client’s needs, each meeting incorporated a mindfulness meditation activity (also reflection), focused on the relevant mindset required for each of Theory U’s stages, for example, inquiring and acting with an ‘open mind’. Action steps taken during the project were creative and productive activities, for example, the
creation of the member survey, and subsequent data analysis (both reflection and action) to be described in the meeting observations below.

**Meeting Observations**

**Co-Initiation: Meeting # 1**

The purpose of this meeting was to: form the group, set common intentions for the project, become familiar with the proposed project flow, be introduced to Theory U’s main concepts and to begin the co-initiation steps of ‘downloading past patterns’ and seeing MEO with ‘fresh eyes’. Given that a survey of the larger membership was to occur between this and the next meeting, the tangible outcomes expected included a list of survey questions generated by the project team.

This meeting was attended by eight people, including myself, and took place in the ED’s home, as MEO did not have a physical location. Prior to the meeting I provided short summaries of Theory U, Co-operative Inquiry, the project flow and a detailed agenda. As in every meeting, we began with a check-in to help people arrive into the room from their busy days. Most individuals, particularly the teachers, shared the stress of their hectic schedules, but were happy to be in a group of ‘like-minded’ people and ready and excited to learn about Theory U, while being engaged in acting for MEO’s future. We reviewed Theory U, people were particularly interested in the mindfulness approach, and shared they weren’t quite sure how it worked but were motivated to live the experience. We then had a ten minute meditation session with a focus on suspending the ‘voice of judgment’ to help us access an ‘open mind’, particularly helpful in looking at past habits and patterns. Before each meeting I asked for a volunteer to lead the
mindfulness meditation, but no one stepped forward, so for this meeting I asked the ED to lead the meditation session as I knew he had experience doing so.

To set our common intentions, the group created a list of group norms. They seemed to have been influenced by the suggestion to suspend the ‘voice of judgment’, as their first norm was ‘listen without judgment’. Other norms included: ‘feel free to share your ideas’, ‘be open’, ‘use kind speech’, ‘each meeting should have a meditation session’ and ‘respect each other’. Some project members commented that they had participated in many group norm setting activities and had never seen such thoughtful and respectful norms before.

Our first inquiry activity, meant to help us begin ‘downloading past patterns’ around the focus of the project, ‘volunteer engagement, was led by the questions ‘who is my ‘self’ as a volunteer?’ and ‘what did it look like when I was fully engaged as a volunteer?’ To encourage reflection and relationship building we began the inquiry in pairs. As a large group we shared our reflections and brainstormed a list of ‘the qualities of being engaged as a volunteer’. The list they created included: ‘a sense of accomplishment and results’, ‘I learned a lot and had fun’, and ‘there was a clear purpose, roles and timing, and opportunities to share my skills’.

We turned our attention away from the individual ‘self’ to MEO’s ‘self’ and reviewed the history of MEO, led by the ED who had the most knowledge of past events given he was the founder and involved in all aspects. The purpose of this activity was to create a common ground of knowledge within the team, or in PAR terms, to ‘democratize’ the source of knowledge, which is a source of power. Using their shared qualities of engagement they just had established, and considering MEO’s history and current state, they created questions that they thought would help them to better understand how to more actively engage MEO’s members as volunteers. For example, in addition to demographic questions (are you a teacher? a mindfulness educator?) a
question was: ‘How important are the following to you if you were to volunteer for MEO?’: sense of community, sense of accomplishment, clearly defined roles/goals, sharing my skills, learning new skills, giving back, leadership, defining strategic direction, and being a catalyst for change. This question was followed by, ‘Which roles are you interested in?’: strategic planning, planning events, presenting at events, technical support, administrative support, advocating for MEO in schools, and writing informational content for MEO. The online survey would be sent to the membership in between this meeting and the next meeting, where we would analyze the results.

Trying to honor PAR’s principles of involving members in the planning, design and implementation, I asked for their thoughts on how to best administer this survey. As a process consultant I felt this was a good opportunity for them to create their own process, with my guidance if necessary, for engaging with the members of their system. But given the team members’ busy schedules, it was I who ended up creating and managing the survey and survey data. However, the ED and I did finalize the wording and coordinate sending the survey to approximately 400 members.

**Co-Sensing: Meeting # 2**

The purpose of the second meeting was to process, reflect upon and analyze the survey results as part of observing and ‘co-sensing’ their own system by looking inwards from its boundaries. In our reflection activity, which followed the basic check-in at every meeting, members reported at being amazed how productive they had been in creating a survey and already having the results back, and that they were looking forward to hearing what people had to say. Before looking at the data, we sat for a meditation focused on accessing the ‘open heart’
by suspending the ‘voice of cynicism’ about what they were about to see from the system. The ED located an online guided audio meditation which we followed.

Prior to working with the survey data, I introduced the specific Theory U’s concept of the “blind spot” by using a visual exercise in which one can experience their own reticular ‘blind spot’. The exercise was borrowed from Maturana and Varela’s book, Tree of Knowledge (1992) and is shown below in Figure 6. If one holds this image at arm’s length, covers the left eye, focuses on the plus (+) sign with the right eye, and then moves the paper slowly towards or away from the face, the large black dot will disappear. This is due to the fact the there is a spot of the retina that does not see, that effectively, is blind for all human being. Several members were surprised to learn about their physical ‘blind spot’ and it seemed to have quite an impact for some people, as it was a question that would pop up in every subsequent meeting.

Given that we were about to analyze data, and analysis involves interpretation and perceptions, I hoped that they would consider, as Theory U would have you do, that there are some things we just can’t see based on where we place our attention.

Figure 6- The ‘blind spot’: source Maturana & Varela (1992)
To work with the data, I designed an activity where the group would analyze the survey data on their own, that is, I did not pre-analyze the data. I was trying to honor the Process Consulting idea that ‘the client owns the problem and the solution’ and to empower them, as in PAR, to come to their own conclusions that were relevant to their context. They worked in two small groups with slips of paper I had prepared containing phrases or sentences from the raw data for qualitative questions, and the graphical results for the quantitative questions. I suggested some guiding questions to consider, such as, ‘what is the essence of this community that makes it strong?’ and ‘what are the members of MEO telling us about how to engage them?’ Their goal was to present their findings to the group at the end of the meeting and to compare and contrast what each group had found. The data analysis and presentation activity formed the bulk of this meeting as the group worked at ‘seeing with fresh eyes’ to ‘sense from the field’.

As a large group they concluded that volunteer motivation was influenced by: feeling a sense of community; having a sense of accomplishment; having clearly defined goals, roles and timing; and the opportunity to share skills and knowledge. We ended with an inquiry into what might be a ‘blind spot’ for MEO, but perhaps it was too early in the process, as they couldn’t settle on one at the moment. However, they were considering the possibility that there might be a mismatch between what members’ wanted and what the organization wanted to offer, for example MEO desired technical and administrative help while the interest in doing this kind of work was extremely low.

**Co-Presencing: Meeting # 3**

The goals of this meeting were to shift our attention to see the whole system and its ecosystem, to develop a ‘collective presence’ around the current reality of volunteer engagement, to start articulating what MEO’s self is as a voluntary organization and to determine what past
habits and patterns need to be ‘let go’ of to help this future to emerge. We engaged in a meditation session with the theme of ‘suspending the voice of fear’ and accessing the ‘open will’ to act. This time again, as no one had volunteered to lead, I located an online guided audio meditation. I didn’t feel comfortable doing this as I didn’t feel qualified to select or ‘lead’ a meditation. As we reflected on our actions in the past meetings, more than one person reported that they found these meetings to be the most calming and welcoming setting they experienced during their week, an indication perhaps of the effects on some of them with their busy schedules as teachers.

To help shift our attention to the ‘whole’ system, as a learning intervention and in support of suspending the ‘voice of cynicism’, I presented data from outside their local system adapted from an international study of how to create ‘volunteer-friendly’ organizations (Allen, 2006). The study contained myths, truths and approaches found to be common in volunteer organizations. From a Theory U perspective, a myth might be considered what to ‘let go’ of, a ‘truth’ as what to ‘let come in’, and an ‘approach’ as how to ‘act’ from the future. For example, a myth was “there are not enough people willing to do all the work that needs to be done”, a truth was, “there is almost and endless supply of volunteers – if we recognize who they are and know how to mobilize them”, and an approach was, “we tend to think of volunteer opportunities as existing only within organizations, rather than outside of them”. There was a mixed reception to this information, with some feeling it spoke directly to MEO’s context, while some felt it was less relevant as MEO was still emerging.

Turning our attention back to MEO’s system we continued to look at the survey results and the team’s findings, and reflected together on ‘what are the key themes?’ and ‘have we seen any blind spot’s?’ This time the group did identify two potential ‘blind spot’s’. One was a ‘blind
spot’ in how MEO understood the member’s needs and wants, which may be related to how MEO portrayed itself or how members perceived MEO. The survey showed that there was a strong desire from the members, for MEO to deliver or provide opportunities for mindfulness training, however MEO was focused on directing people to other organizations where they might get training. A second ‘blind spot’ was that the group perceived there were different agendas and ‘vested interests’ around mindfulness training in MEO, and that to avoid working at cross purposes, they should consider ‘what’s in it for me?’ for all stakeholders. By shifting its attention to the whole system, the project team was beginning to form its own perception that there might be a misalignment between what MEO wanted to offer, and what the members wanted to receive.

Having identified some ‘blind spot’s’, we began to inquire into ‘what do we need to let go of?’ and the project team began to share their own personal interests and ‘agendas’ in being involved with MEO. One member hoped to ‘grow a mindfulness business’, while others ‘wanted to bring mindfulness to their classroom’, and another hoped MEO could be the ‘expert in Canada for mindfulness in education’. We moved on to consider one of Theory U’s central questions, ‘what is our work?’ The group brainstormed guiding themes seen from their inquiries to help with defining what that work might be. Some of these themes were: ‘know your audience’, ‘ensure strategic alignment between MEO, volunteers and education system’, ‘build change agents’, ‘build community’, ‘define roles and goals’ and ‘measure accomplishments’. Even though we were considering ‘what is our work?’ and had been looking at ‘what is our self?’ in the previous meetings, the group felt that the overall vision of who MEO was, was not clear to them, nor was the ‘how-to’ of its mission. This made it challenging for them to determine what should be done with volunteer engagement, as they felt strongly that it should be aligned with
MEO’s vision and mission. The results of the co-presencing meeting were that they had discovered some ‘blind spot’s’, found some things to ‘let go’ of, and had a sense of what they needed to create – a vision for volunteer engagement, a one year mission, job descriptions and tasks, and a communication plan. They also recognized the need for a clarification of MEO’s overall vision and a mission with more concrete implementation plans.

Co-Creating: Meeting # 4 - Crystallizing

We entered the fourth stage, co-creating, with the goal of ‘crystallizing’ our vision and intentions for the future of volunteer engagement in MEO and considering ‘what is required in order to learn and act from the future as it emerges?’ There were a few conditions that were different in this meeting. One was that the ED was not in attendance, the second was that the meeting was held at another project team member’s home, as all our other meetings had been held in the ED’s home. Knowing that he would be absent, prior to this meeting the ED had sent an email to the group stating, “I’ve been thinking about what I can offer for the next meeting, and I feel it would be best not to push you in one direction or another. You guys have been doing a great job, and so I am just going to practice letting go’ (ED, personal communication, June 2014). It seemed that the theme of letting go was resonating with the project team.

For this meeting’s meditation I had decided to directly ask someone whom I felt was interested, and I knew had mindfulness training, to lead a meditation for the group that integrated the concepts of ‘open mind’, ‘open heart’ and ‘open will’, as required in the co-creating stage. The member was happy to do so and other team members reported it to be a valuable experience for the team. In this meeting, the group although always engaged, seemed to emerge more into the foreground, requiring less of me, and they really led the flow and direction of this meeting. Although the ED had indicated it would be helpful if concrete tasks and responsibilities were
created, they decided to create a list of values, a vision of volunteer engagement, and a one year mission for achieving this mission. Their vision was that “MEO will partner with mindfulness ambassadors to co-create the integration of mindfulness into education” where all volunteers were considered mindfulness ambassadors, as they had seen a strong desire from members to be ‘change agents’. Their values included that ‘the organization is a mindful and open organization’ in its structure, in being present with their current reality, and in regularly reflecting on priorities and alignment with ‘what is’. Their one year mission included items like: ‘building a community where skills and practices can be exchanged’, ‘defining priorities and tasks so that volunteers can get working’ and ‘defining the scope of volunteer training’.

I had the intention of creating an action plan out of this meeting, if possible, but when we came to the point where this might happen, the group was suddenly divided on how to move forward – similar to the dynamic around planning and acting seen in MEO overall. Some felt that we couldn’t make decisions on the actions to take without the ED present, and without more knowledge of the current state of existing tasks in the organization. Others felt we were empowered to move forward and had all the knowledge we needed in the room. I was amazed to see the dynamic I had modelled in the scan, come to life in the project team right at the moment when they might have made concrete plans for acting in service of moving MEO forward. Perhaps it was my own perception of what constituted action (an action plan with concrete steps and assigned individuals) that led me to see this dynamic, and/or perhaps MEO’s issue was not so much about ‘extremes’ or dualisms between planning and acting, leading and following, but more about a lack of confidence or clarity of who was empowered to make decisions and act for MEO. With MEO’s ‘vague’ organizational structure, which was voiced during the scan, it seemed possible that the dynamics that were hindering MEO from moving forward were a
structural ‘dilemma of its own making’. The meeting did conclude at this point and we agreed to continue with action planning in the next meeting.

**Co-Creating: Meeting #5 - Prototyping**

In our fifth and final meeting we entered Theory U’s ‘prototyping’ step of the co-creating stage. This is when the group may begin to act from the future by creating small ‘prototypes’ and working on them with the philosophy of ‘fail fast, learn early’ in the process of developing new ways of being for the organization. The key issues I had perceived in the environmental scan included a tendency for ‘following’ and waiting for a ‘leader’ to make a decision. Since my proposal had been to create more leaders, effectively distributing decision-making power, I was consciously staying more in the background, trying not to take up too much leadership space, and to encourage others to step forward. For the meditation session in this meeting, again I directly asked another individual to lead a meditation of their choice, and the request was accepted. Now at least three project team members had led a meditation, including the ED.

The project team presented their values, mission and vision to the ED, who was not present at the previous meeting as mentioned, and to which he had some differences of opinion and resistance. At this point the project team spent a significant amount of time talking around the actual goal of the meeting, which was to select or create something to work on and create a plan for how to do it. They spiraled in ‘looking’ and ‘thinking’ about who MEO was or was not, what their strategies should be, what the future should or could be, what was happening in the education system, what was happening with mindfulness curriculum etc. etc. At one or more points they did look to me to bring them back on task, however it seemed that something needed to be worked out, and they would continue to go back to ‘past habits and patterns’ to ruminate on
strategy (planning) rather than concrete tactics (action), which is what they had asked me to help them with.

When the ED asked for opinions on his confidential plans for the future of MEO that he had not previously shared and were unrelated to the work the project team had been doing, there was a fairly heated debate with some project team members against making these moves which could change MEO’s identity, stating it was too early for MEO, who had not yet established itself. This debate appeared to be a pivotal moment, one member noted I had been quiet and asked me what I thought, to which I did not give an opinion, respecting my role of process consultant, since they ‘own the problem and the solution’, but instead I ‘accessed my ignorance’ and asked what were the benefits and risks. Soon, one member who had been against the proposed changes, stepped forward and took leadership in helping the group to identify a concrete priority for the volunteer engagement team that was aligned with a list of MEO’s overall strategies and short-term goals that the ED had provided for this meeting. From here they designed their own project and a process to accomplish their task, setting the meeting date, determining what needed to be done and who should be involved. The project team came completely into the foreground as new leaders stepped forward and a new entity, the ‘Volunteer Engagement Committee’, for MEO was formed, as I observed them creating and leading their own processes for how to plan and act for MEO. It seems that, as a group, they had finally squeezed through the ‘eye of the needle’ and were well on their way to ascending the ‘U’ process, and to embodying and acting from the future of volunteer engagement that they had co-discovered and co-created.
Summary

We entered the U-process with a newly formed collective of individuals looking to be in relationship with and of service to MEO, itself an emerging organization. They had inquired into Theory U’s central questions, identified potential ‘blind spot’s’, determined what to ‘let go’ of, and what to ‘let come’ in. They had taken their first steps to experiment with acting from the new ‘MEO’ by creating their own project prototype. Importantly, from this process a new entity emerged within MEO, the ‘Volunteer Engagement Committee’, with a co-created ‘self’, purpose and plan for action. Additionally, new leaders also emerged, stepping forward to lead mediation sessions and define concrete actions in service of MEO.

Reflection on my own process

I was also a newly forming process consultant and PAR researcher experiencing my own U-process. After designing this project and leading a group through Theory U, I came to realize a few of my own ‘blind spot’s’. One ‘blind spot’ for me was that I realized my attention was focused on the organization and the end product, and the needs of my primary client (the ED - and MEO overall), to ‘get some help’, i.e. to get work done. This ‘blind spot’ quietly influenced my work with the project team. For example, my original plan was designed with my attention on the organizational ‘self’, while missing the project teams’ ‘self’. The plan was ‘nicely’ aligned with four meetings, one for each of the four stages we would cover, and ideally resulting in the desired end product - a prototype of the work to be done and who would do it. As shown in the meeting observations, we actually had five meetings, and the fifth one was added in agreement with the team when they had not yet come up with a prototype of what to do. My focus on the end product made me blind to the fact that the project team had to go through its own U-process (which takes time) as a team, while also going through a U-process as MEO, before being able to
embody any new actions. Since Theory U is an evolutionary and cumulative process the project team would first need to see its’ own ‘self’, before being able to act for ‘MEO.

Another ‘blind spot’ for me was my assumption that because MEO was a mindfulness education organization, and many members would have their own mindfulness practice or have taught mindfulness to others, that the project team members would be comfortable in leading a meditation session. But as noted, even though I sent an open invitation to the team every meeting, people only stepped forward if I asked them directly. As a process consultant, I am expected to take this behavior in as ‘data’, since ‘everything is data’. During my many interactions both inside and outside of the project meetings, I had heard more than one person express the belief that leading a mindfulness meditation was the realm of experienced and trained teachers, and that an untrained teacher could possibly do harm. I interpreted these sentiments to point to a mental model that ‘only experts can teach or lead mindfulness’. When I asked specific people to lead the meditation I also perceived their nervousness regarding whether they were ‘qualified’, and if what they chose to do would be ‘right’, similar feelings I had when I selected a guided audio meditation.

From a Theory U perspective, the ‘voice of fear’ was inhibiting people from accessing their ‘open will’ to act. My interpretation of the significance of the project team’s demonstrated reluctance to lead meditation sessions, is that it points to an underlying mental model in MEO that an ‘expert’ is required to do the work (mindfulness) of MEO. Thus in my mind, the key issue of ‘getting it right’ versus ‘getting it done’ perceived during my scan of MEO, was exacerbated by a hidden mental model (i.e., ‘blind spot’) that very few people were actually qualified to ‘get it done’.
Discussion

The primary research question that was explored in this paper, was the relevance of applying a combination of Theory U (a mindfulness-based approach), Process Consulting and Participatory Action Research (PAR) in a mindfulness-focused organization. First, I will consider whether using Theory U in a mindfulness-focused organization was relevant.

The common link between MEO and Theory U was the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness has its roots in a comprehensive Buddhist worldview and ethical paradigm (Nhat Hanh, 1998) and MEO was born out of a conference led by a famous Buddhist monk. In writing this paper, I saw a striking relationship between two major Buddhist principles, non-dualism and the ‘middle way’, and the key issues and project proposal I had made to MEO. The key issues that I had perceived originally, were an imbalance between planning and acting, and an imbalance between leading and following, with divided thinking in how to move forward which was leading to a level of stuck-ness around action. I proposed that they balance these dynamics by creating more leaders who could take action.

Buddhist’s believe that the root of our problems (suffering) can be found in dualistic thinking where we tend to see pairs of separate objects (for example, planning and acting) when in Buddhist thought, everything is connected, interdependent and part of the same natural processes (Shen & Midgley, 2007). Buddhists have a goal called non-dualism, which means one achieves the transcendence of dualistic thinking using the tool of mindfulness. Achieving the recognition of non-dualism as one travels the eight-fold path previously mentioned, helps one to achieve a ‘middle way’. The ‘middle way’ is a path to “the insight of openness and the avoidance of extreme positions… [that are] characterized by incomplete knowledge…and deriving from strong and often unconscious emotion” (Shen & Midgley, 2007, p.172). The ‘middle way’ is
dynamic, rather than a fixed and absolute path, and depends on the local conditions, while being “synonymous with knowing what constitutes moderation and balance, or knowing what optimum is” (p. 191). Applying a Buddhist lens to the key issues I perceived, seems to indicate dualistic thinking and behaviors around planning and acting and leading and following. My proposal to ‘balance’ these dynamics might also be considered a proposal to find a ‘middle way’.

Given that mindfulness is a tool for finding a ‘middle way’ and as quoted earlier by Kabat-Zinn (1994), mindfulness is a key to getting ‘unstuck’, from a Buddhist perspective the use of Theory U was a relevant approach. Further, given that MEO was experienced in using this ‘tool’, the use of Theory U should be even more relevant and effective. Feedback about Theory U provided by project team member’s after the project closed included, “Theory U was a really wonderful process for making everyone's voice and opinions count. It also helped us to be ‘present’ and let go of agendas, and desired outcomes” and “the ‘blind spot’ was important, it allowed the group to step back and think about what we might be missing, other considerations which provided richness in the dialogue” (Project Team Feedback, personal communication, July 2014). Project team members’ thoughts about the results of the project included, “MEO has received a tremendous benefit from this project. We gained a fresh and deep perspective on our volunteer engagement, actually engaged a team of about 8 people, and now are developing a very well thought out plan to engage volunteers” and “the structure and approach applied to the project combined with the expertise of the facilitator provided a comprehensive review and dialogue around the core principles of MEO. This enabled the project participants to clearly articulate the vision and mission of the volunteers and align it with those of MEO, thereby establishing a much stronger foundation by which MEO can move forward with the productive
engagement of the volunteers at large” (Project Team Feedback, personal communications, July 2014).

In addition to being a mindful process, Theory U also focuses on allowing the creative process of emergence to unfold to bring about transformation. Given the results of the project, which included the emergence of the ‘Volunteer Engagement Committee’ along with their prototype project to act on tasks of importance for leading MEO forward and the emergence of new leaders in MEO, combined with the project team’s own opinion of the value that the Theory U process brought to them, indicates that the use of Theory U in a mindfulness organization, was effective in helping the organization to help itself get ‘unstuck’.

Now I will consider whether it was relevant to use Process Consulting, PAR and Theory U together. Process Consulting aims to help a ‘human system to help itself’ (Schein, 1999, p.1) by creating a relationship between the process consultant and the client where the client may gain awareness of, comprehend and take action on their own internal and external process events. Theory U is a deep process of inquiry which has the participants looking both internally and externally as individuals and as an organization to gain awareness of what may be hindering them so they can create new behaviors and actions. A part of the relationship that I created with MEO included the structured project and processes designed around Theory U, that I brought with me. As a process consultant, the use of Theory U can be seen as an approach for creating a container which allows the client to help themselves and to ‘access the current reality’, which is particularly relevant for this group considering Theory U uses mindfulness to ‘see’ the past, current and future realities. It might even be argued that there is a link between mindfulness and Process Consulting. In creating a ‘here and now’ relationship where clients might gain awareness
and insight into their behaviors and current reality, Process Consulting is really asking the consultant and client to ‘co-presence’ and thereby ‘co-create’ a ‘mindful’ relationship.

PAR is geared towards utilizing the practice of research as an agent of transformational change in communities by directly involving community members with learning, planning, designing solutions and acting on a focus of ‘immediate interest’ to the local population (Swantz, 2013). Theory U is a transformational participatory change and planning process that attempts to build collective awareness and action in groups and organizations towards acting from their best future selves. Given that both Theory U and PAR are focused on transformational change and are based on action research, in purpose and in method they are suited to be used together. Theory U provides a process while PAR is focused on being inclusive of community members and participants. In this project, my choice of PAR was influenced more by my perception of the key issues as well as the client’s focus on ‘volunteer engagement’, rather than being a match with either Process Consulting or Theory U. The relevance of using PAR in this project was in its political intentions of creating an inclusive environment and empowering individuals and local communities in creating the conditions in which they live and work (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), to effectively create and give voice to local leaders, as was my proposal to MEO.

PAR, as mentioned earlier, empowers participants to be directly involved in the planning, design and implementation of solutions for issues of local concern. This project directly involved members of MEO in creating the solutions to their chosen focus, within a structured process, Theory U. Given that MEO is an emerging and relatively unstructured organization, and I received feedback that people were looking for direction and concreteness, my belief is that the use of Theory U with PAR created a familiar mindful grounding for the team, and empowered them by providing a sufficient and flexible structure to create their own conditions of acting for
MEO. Feedback from the team supports my conclusion, for example “the processes used in the project were particularly useful in setting the stage for the project participants and creating an open and inclusive environment” and “the process by which we were guided was excellent as it provided a good framework and also allowed the team to go where it wanted” (Project Team Feedback, personal communications, July 2014).

Given the positive results and positive feedback from MEO as demonstrated throughout this paper, as well as the links, similarities and compatibilities shown to exist between Theory U, Process Consulting and PAR, I feel confident in concluding from my experience and my project team’s experience, that using Theory U, Process Consulting and PAR in an emerging mindfulness-focused organization is a relevant and effective approach. Moreover, it is worth considering that the context in which I have made these conclusions is a mindfulness organization, where many individuals have a Buddhist-inspired reflective practice. As demonstrated, reflective inquiry is a common link between Theory U, Process Consulting and PAR (with its action research base). Thus my hypothesis, to be further explored at a later date, is that any form of ‘reflective’, ‘contemplative’ or ‘experiential’ mind/body practice may stand in for ‘mindfulness’ as a tool to help one successfully navigate the ‘U process’ and its hindrances to achieving an ‘open mind’, ‘open heart’, and ‘open will’.
Conclusion

This paper presented a case study of an emerging advocacy organization for mindfulness in education, and their inquiry into Theory U’s central questions - “who is my/our self?”, ‘what is my/our work?’ and ‘what is required in order to learn and act from the future as it emerges?’, as well as the author’s parallel journey of diving into the ‘U’ as an emerging Process Consultant and Participatory Action Researcher.

The primary research question was of the relevance of utilizing Participatory Action Research (PAR), Process Consulting and Theory U together in an emerging mindfulness-focused organization. PAR, Process Consulting and Theory U were demonstrated to share the underlying methodological approaches of Action Research, various forms of inquiry and reflective thinking. Additionally, PAR and Theory U were shown to share a political intention in empowering the local participants to transform the conditions of the system which they inhabit. Furthermore, Process Consulting was shown to be a tool for creating a principled container, one in which the system learns to help itself and owns its challenges and the solutions to those challenges. The integrated application of these process-driven approaches, points to the power of process design for the empowerment of community members. Mindfulness was shown to be an effective, if not familiar, ‘reflective’ tool at an organizational level for developing mindful action, particularly with the use of Theory U in a mindfulness organization. Evidence of the effectiveness of the integrated approach described above, was the emergence of a new entity, the ‘Volunteer Engagement Committee’ in this new and emerging organization, complete with its own focus and future project work aligned with the overall mission and vision of the organization.

An additional Buddhist perspective was offered on the key issues of the organization, given its and Theory U’s background in mindfulness, and the Buddhist roots of mindfulness.
Moreover, Shen and Midgley (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) have found that incorporating Buddhist thinking in organizational consulting with a Buddhist-based organization is more effective and better accepted by the clients. For example, integrating mindfulness activities in every project meeting and fostering mindful visioning and decision-making at an organizational level was never questioned, but was welcomed, even if the members may have initially felt intimidated to lead a meditation session. Practicing mindfulness at an organizational level has been part of the organizational learning experience.

The organization’s presenting problem was that ‘all the work’ was primarily being done by one individual, yet there was a large base of potential volunteers. The organization was looking to engage this volunteer base actively in the work of the organization. The author proposed a model of her perceptions of their key issues which showed an imbalance between ‘planning and acting’ (mostly planning), and ‘leading and following’ (one leader, many followers). The Buddhist interpretation offered in this paper, was that dualistic thinking and behaviors (i.e. ‘planning and acting’, ‘leading and following’) within the organization, may be leading to the imbalance hypothesized to contribute to a stuck-ness on action. The Buddhist solution to getting unstuck from dualistic thinking leading to extreme positions in behavior, is to use the tool of mindfulness to transcend dualisms and achieve non-dualism. Non-dualism leads to achieving the Buddhist goal of the ‘middle way’ between extreme positions. For this organization the ‘middle way’ between ‘getting it right’ and ‘getting it done’ involved transcending the systemic dualisms previously mentioned that resulted in one individual ‘doing all the work’, by creating a new organizational team with new leaders and a co-created vision and mission in a project aligned with the larger organization.
References


