ADVANCES IN PRESENCING

Volume III: Collective Approaches in Theory U

Edited by Olen Gunnlaugson, Ph.D. & William Brendel, Ed.D.

A timely anthology showcasing Theory U and presencing perspectives from the latest research of practitioners in the field.
CHAPTER 4

Italian u.lab Hubs:
A Study and Comparison of the Application and Adaptation of Theory U Principles and Practices to the Specificities of a Local Community of Learners in Rome and some other Italian Cities

Rachel Hentsch

Introduction

The following inquiry explores how the globally-resonating principles of Theory U have evolved locally through the u.lab community in Rome, Italy. It will examine the hosting prototypes and models created and adapted through hands-on experience by the Rome hosting team between August 2016 and October 2018, and the results obtained for each type of hosting experience. The Rome experience is compared with those of other Theory U-related hubs from different cities across Italy, in particular Brianza, Firenze, Livorno, Milano, and Trieste, and one virtual, online hub.

This inquiry is an attempt to map the various elements that
typically (or uniquely) make up a u.lab hub, and understand to what extent each of these elements--the hosting team, the learner audience, the dynamics and relationships between team members, the programme structure, the location, the collective intention (or absence thereof) -- contribute to shaping and determining the vitality and longevity of a given hub.

We posit that prototyping is an ongoing and never-ending process. As both the workshops and hosting team configurations are in constant interactive evolution, this chapter does not expect nor attempt to reach any conclusions. It merely aims to capture and reflect upon a fragment of the journey that Theory U and its ramifications can imprint in terms of awakening a city’s inhabitants to a new personal and collective potential, and a more carefully stewarded future for humankind and the planet.

This chapter also identifies factors that can contribute to the success of hub hosting so that similar efforts may better meet the needs of their audiences.

STORY: stages, iterations, and evolution of u.lab Hub Roma

Information around “u.lab Hub Roma” explored below includes materials from four founding members and data from digital social media spaces inhabited by the community. It also includes my personal experience as a u.lab Hub Roma participant in 2016, and my hub host experience with a team of seven other co-hosts from September 2017 until August 2018.

The Rome u.lab hub, as it existed until the time of writing (November 2018), has undergone five separate iterations since its inception in August 2016. Each subsequent new model has been based on experiences and conclusions drawn from the previous initiative, and has been adapted according to new externalities such as location constraints, member affluence, and team configuration.

Each model is examined according to the following points of comparison: hosting team configuration, team intention, team dynamics, learner audience, choice, and impact of venue and programme structure.
Chapter 4 - Italian u.lab Hubs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hub Name and Period of Existence</th>
<th>Number of hub hosts in team</th>
<th>Enrolled</th>
<th>Hub participants at start</th>
<th>Hub participant(s) at end</th>
<th>Location for hub activities</th>
<th>Paced alongside the u.lab 1x</th>
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<tr>
<td>u.lab Hub Roma 2016 2016 Sep-Dec</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24 (-30%)</td>
<td>CFMT/Manageritalia</td>
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<td>53</td>
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<td>58</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>UPractice Nov’17-Feb’18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4 (-43%)</td>
<td>Segni di Ripartenza</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u.lab Hub Roma 2018 2018 Sep-Dec</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Manageritalia</td>
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Table 1 – The chronological sequence of iterations and main characteristics of each phase of the Rome u.lab Hub

2016 SEP-DEC: u.lab Hub Roma 2016

A Hub Alongside the MOOC

The local u.lab Rome Hub was birthed in late summer 2016 with a bang, by four founding hub hosts with managerial, consultancy and coaching backgrounds, who came together and very quickly pulled together an action plan within a period of less than a month. The enormous global outreach, gratuitousness of the offering, and the unquestionable aspirational pull of the MIT brand were harnessed through the Rome hosting team’s excellent ability to:

- Effectively communicate the Theory U vision through plugging into existing robust hub host networks, via mailing lists and social media channels;
- Provide well-located, spacious, and reputable venues for meetings. These included precincts of CFMT (Centro di Formazione Management del Terziario) near Termini sta-
tion, and Coaching Circles at Manageritalia Roma head-
quarters, in the central area of Prati, and very near to public transport nodes.

This set of elements dovetailed right into a pre-existing local thirst for learning and innovation and generated considerable initial interest. In the context of a large city riddled with stuck energies and crippled by chronic logistical paralysis, the contamination potential was momentous and promising. Initial enrolments rolled in, and a good number of participants showed up at the beginning of the learning journey. The hosting team was fresh, motivated, and on its very own learning journey alongside the learner community. Subsequently, the global resonance of Theory U teachings and practices collided with the limitations of language, culture, and social background, with an overall decrease of about 30% in attendance between the launch of the learning journey and its closure (ref. Table 1). An attempt to create a solution that would better meet the unfulfilled needs of its members led to the second Rome Hub iteration, more closely tailored to the specificities of the local audience in terms of schedule, language, content delivery, and coaching.

2017 FEB-JUN: u.lab Hub Roma Italiano

u.lab Revisited - A Complete Customisation of the Learning Journey

At this point of its learning and facilitation journey, the hosting team was highly conscious of the inherent obstacles present in the plug-and-play format of the u.lab MOOC. They were also highly motivated to amplify their hosting capacity to share the Theory U learnings through a custom adaptation of the various programme elements, in response to the needs that had emerged from listening to their local audience. Thus was born the u.lab Hub Roma 2017 “Italian edition” with the same team of four hosting members, the same venue, and with the following new elements:
• A new evening schedule, outside of office hours, to better accommodate the constraints of those who were keen to participate but had not been able to do so during the MOOC live sessions; the latter, scheduled for 10 am Boston time, translated into 4 pm local Rome time;
• A set of videos subtitled in Italian: all relevant learning videos from the u.lab 1x online course underwent translation (the result of a goodwill effort on the part of the Italian u.lab community). A Youtube channel held this collection of resources;
• translation from English to Italian of the digital tools and documents provided by the Presencing Institute, including a customised version of the listening assessment tool.

Despite the effort to tailor the hub’s offering to the necessities of its members, the pace of the learning journey still required a degree of commitment and continuity that was beyond what participants were able to sustain. This is reflected in the steep drop in participation, from 53 members at the beginning of the course, to 19 when the course ended, a decrease of well over half of the members (ref. Table 1). At this point the hosting group also began to run into some amount of internal friction, due to the toll the programme took on their time and energy, the load of running two u.lab cycles almost back-to-back, and the emergence of differing intentions around the hub vision and mission.

On the flip side, out of the course emerged a handful of passionate community members who were inspired enough to want to join forces with the hosting team and breathe life into the next iteration of the hub hosting journey.

2017 SEP-DEC: u.lab Hub Roma 2017

New Team, New Venue

The new team constellation of eight members comprised three veterans (the “old guard” from the previous two hub hosting experiences), and five new entries, of which I was one. We
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convened over the summer of 2017 to discuss the future of the Rome hub, agree on a shared vision, and prepare for the session to be launched in mid-September, concurrently with the beginning of the 2017 edition of the u.lab online course on edX. The plan was that the hub would explore and develop three areas:

- capacity building (based on the MOOC programme in terms of content and pace),
- project consultancy (based on the members’ range of personal expertise in various fields, ranging from coaching to teaching to management and entrepreneurship expertise), and
- research and development (experimental new methods and tools to be evolved).

Possible partnerships were explored and a sensing journey was undertaken by part of the hub team to establish a suitable location for the u.lab and coaching circle meetings. The aim was to possibly extend the u.lab reach to new audience segments and create consulting opportunities where Theory U might be applied. An agreement was struck with BIC Lazio (Business Innovation Centre), an organisation established by the Lazio Region for managing the regional network of incubators and promoting business development, for hosting the u.lab live sessions and coaching circles.

The u.lab cycle thus created was able to attract both new and old participants. Despite a promising start with 58 people enrolled, and the formation of three coaching circles, attendance soon dropped again as the programme unfolded. The usual barriers of time zones, language, pacing, and urban congestion took their toll on the community, with very few members reaching the finish line at the fourth and last live session. The location made it quite challenging to reach via public transport. Desired synergies with the BIC Lazio system did not occur: the latter acted merely as physical container space, and there was no cross-pollination despite the joint communication efforts.

The hosting team, however, was still enthusiastic, despite losing two of its eight members to other professional incumbencies.
(two of the novice hosts had underestimated the impact that hosting would entail).

A bespoke u.lab Hub Roma website and supporting online magazine series were created to facilitate the sharing of relevant information in a form that was as user-friendly as possible for an Italian public, which often found itself struggling with the structure and language of the contents on the official Presencing Institute website.

As the MOOC cycle drew to a close, the remaining team of five hosts explored possibilities and ideas, including the project of creating a learning journey using elements of the u.lab course and reassembling them differently. This project included placing more emphasis on the tools and practices and looking for new ways to adapt the offering to the community. At this point, another (veteran) host stepped out of the team, due to accumulated hosting fatigue.
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NOV 2017-FEB 2018: U.PRACTICE

A Practice-Based Independent Workshop Initiative

With the u.lab 2017 online course having reached its end, and therefore also the agreed collaboration time with BIC Lazio-- it was necessary to find a new hosting space. One of the team members from the remaining five was able, through professional connections, to secure a venue within a consulting firm, but this came at a cost-- albeit minimal. It meant that the project now needed to factor in some form of budgetary system and accounting. Inevitably the topic of financial sustainability was raised, and became one of the ongoing topics within the hub hosting team. This led to more general debate about costs and returns, not only economically, but also in terms of time and personal commitment.

This fourth iteration of the Rome Hub started small-- with ten enrolments, seven initial participants-- and remained small, with four people showing up on the fifth and last session of a series of seminars that we named “UPractice” (ref. Table 1). Some of these were participants from previous u.lab cycles who wished to further their understanding and practice and stay connected with the local community of practitioners. The programme was designed around single Theory U practices, including stakeholder interviews, coaching circles, prototyping-- with two-hour evening sessions, minimal theoretical fundamentals, and maximum hands-on practice time. Members were asked to contribute a symbolic participation fee to help cover the hosting costs.

During this time, the hosting team convened twice, in-between workshop sessions, to make space and apply Theory U practices -- presencing and 3-D sculpture -- to their journey as a team (ref. Fig.A). Team dynamics surfaced and were investigated. The ensuing feeling of cohesion was powerful. The overall picture and perception we all carried home from the half-day of presencing spent together was one of great diversity and strong aspirations, but also of fragile equilibrium. The 3-D sculpture, created collectively with recycled materials, embodied joyous chaos and
eclecticism, and a variety of rotating focal points that well represented the multi-faceted nature of our team and complex interstitial dynamics that held everything together as a whole.

Over time, one of the chronic and recurring weaknesses of the Rome Hub hosting team, as I have experienced it, has been an incapacity to create and maintain regular alignment meetings, necessary to fuel team spirit and energy, and dispel nascent tensions.

Fig. A - Team Presencing Visuals
2018 SEP-DEC: u.lab Hub Roma 2018

A Return to the MOOC Format

When the u.lab 1x 2018 edition launched on 13th September 2018, the Rome Hub had, in the meantime, become fragmented, misaligned, and unprepared. Each host had gone off in their direction, the necessary team realignment had not taken place, and there was no longer a clear mission statement to unify team intention.

The mounting divide between some hosts who wished for a business-oriented direction and others who viewed the u.lab hub initiative as goodwill-based, resulted in an impromptu configuration: four members decided to return to the MOOC format and pace, and moved forward along the lines of the first hub iteration with a tiny audience of 8 participants (ref. Table 1).

I suppose the two big questions we were sitting with at that point were: “Where do we see ourselves in the next few years in terms of hosting? And: “Will we be able to bring new energies into the hub, to carry forward the work that needs to be done?”

METHOD: procedure and points of comparison

Case studies underpinned the research around hub hosting in other Italian cities. For the purpose of comparison, dialogues and a survey\(^4\) were conducted with eleven different hub hosts from five different cities in Italy: Brianza, Firenze, Livorno, Milano, and Trieste-- plus one virtual, online hub. All hub hosts have been referring to the online Hub Host Guide\(^5\) in varying degrees as a reference source for shaping and implementing their respective local initiatives. Many have been connecting online via remote weekly Hub Host Support video meetings on Zoom for dialoguing around specific hosting topics, best practices, and challenges\(^6\).

Points of comparison, which helped to map analogies and divergences between the various hubs, included the following:
STATISTICAL DATA

- Year of hub foundation
- Number of hosts in the hub hosting team
- Number of participants in the hub during and after the online u.lab course cycle
- Hub programme (aligned with, or asynchronous to, MOOC yearly autumnal pace)
- Balance between theory and practice
- Average duration of hub meetings
- Participation rate over time and respective host hypotheses and interpretations of the variations
- Appreciation and impact of each type of Theory U tool or practice
- Channels of communication used between hub hosts and participants
- Degree and type of use of social media in hub host communications
- Job opportunities directly or indirectly derived from hub hosting activities
- Overall degree of participation from members of the hub community
- Presence or absence of rules within the hub
- Management of levels of interest and commitment of hub participants
- Methods for collecting participant feedback

INTERPRETATIVE DATA

- Motivations, aspirations, and expectations of hub hosts
- Evolution of hub host roles over time
- Degree of enjoyment around the role of hosting a hub
- Future projections and intentions of hub hosts
- Perception of the degree of importance, in the success of a hub, of each of the following factors: location, hosting team, programme, participants, collective intention of hosting team, collective intention of participants
• Reflection on what could be done differently
• Reflection on the life-cycle of a hub

One point of comparison that was not taken into account during the period of research, but which has strongly emerged since completing the survey (and seems to greatly impact on the vitality of a hub), regards the internal cohesion of the hub hosting team. This includes the capacity for successfully harnessing or defusing conflicting internal energies.

RESULTS: comparing nine Italian hubs

Out of the nine different Italian hubs taken into consideration for the comparative study, the majority were founded in 2016, which was also the year in which u.lab Hub Roma was founded, and the u.lab MOOC saw its greatest global expansion. This included over 100,000 enrolled online learners from 185 countries around the world. Of these nine Italian hubs, one was no longer active, and two were only still partly active (at the time of writing). Hub sustenance over time appears to require more than merely aligning with the offerings of a freely accessible online programme. Yet, at the same time, the MOOC seems to be the minimum common denominator for a hub to assemble into a community.

The hosting teams typically count between two and five members, with teams of four being the most recurring formation\(^8\). This composition leads to a reflection on the balance between team diversity, agility, and cohesion. It is also interesting to note that four is the number of hub hosts that the Rome Hub started with, and has since returned to.

The number of participants in the hubs observed varies from six to over twenty, depending on the team’s hosting capacity, venue, and communications management. Participation usually drops over time: over half of the hubs have witnessed a substantial decrease in attendance, in four of them participation appears to fluctuate, and only in one of the hubs has participation been sustainable.
Hub hosts report that some of the main factors that seem to cause a decrease in participation include: the absence of a regular meeting space, a regular schedule, tangible projects to work on, group stability, a reliable core team, host motivation, and connecting hub activities to people’s professional sphere. Additional factors include: confusion generated by online programmes running in parallel (u.lab 1x and Transforming Capitalism Lab), lack of inter-hub collaboration within the same city, too many events, language barriers, challenges of the online format (enabling learner disconnect from the physical group), scheduling conflicts, and the fear on the part of learners of falling behind the overall learning pace, leading to abandonment.

Curiosity and interest levels amongst hub participants are always reportedly high but need to be maintained over time given numerous externalities and constraints of work and daily routine. It could also be framed better so that participants are made aware that Theory U teachings require a high degree of time, intellectual and emotional commitment.

Most hubs appear to have placed equal emphasis on the theory and practice of Theory U, with a clear understanding of the importance of applied, hands-on practice as being key to the effectiveness and impact of capacity building for learners.

Different hubs have adopted differing approaches to structuring and governing their communities, with some establishing and applying clear conduct and participation rules, while others go by an implicitly shared set of principles and intentions. Yet, others have left this aspect unaddressed.

The most appreciated and effective practices from Theory U are reportedly, and in decreasing order of preference: the Case Clinics, Social Presencing Theatre 4-D Mapping, Journaling and Stakeholder Interviews⁹. The u.lab MOOC creates a rhythm for the hubs to follow, although each hub then tailors its offerings to the specific requirements of its local community.

One promising observation is that despite an overall decrease in direct participation over time, hub members seem to tend to return in the long term to their hubs, or gravitate towards related initiatives within the hub’s sphere of connections¹⁰.

Five of the eleven hub hosts interviewed reported that their
activity as hub hosts had created direct and indirect new work opportunities, both paid and voluntary. These include seminar speaking opportunities, training course offerings, communal initiatives, social community projects, socio-cultural immigration integration workshops, and private consultancy projects.

When asked about what motivated them to create a hub, hub hosts listed the following reasons: a desire to share and spread Theory U, the joy of shared and participative learning, the possibility of building together, the desire to impact the community, the aspiration to bring small or large changes to one’s own city. Were these aspirations met? The results and feelings are definitely mixed. Some hub hosts report a sense of joy and gratification, while many voices have expressed frustration, fatigue, and disappointing outcomes concerning their initial expectations.

Language used to describe the aspects of hub hosting that have brought hub hosts most joy and satisfaction include: human connection, discovery, projects, feeling of being in a space of trust, unlocking potential, experiencing presencing, like sowing seeds, usefulness, learning, diversity, dialogue, contributing, growth, relationships, and evolution.

The role of each hub host has evolved, with varying phases and degrees of involvement, according to inner motivations, external constraints, and overall team and community dynamics. In their approach to their future roles as hosts, about one-quarter of those I have spoken to do not see themselves continuing as hub hosts at all.

CONCLUSIONS: the vitality and longevity of a hub

When I began my investigation, one of my objectives was to comprehend better why some hubs have tended to grow more than others, and which factors might influence this evolution the most. To do so, I set out to compare the composition and development of different hubs across Italy, to evaluate common traits and divergences in terms of their approach to theoretical learning and practical application, to see whether there is a correlation between this distribution, and participant engagement levels.
In hindsight, I might reframe the question slightly differently: “are hubs subject to a natural lifespan or physiological cycle of “x” years, whereby they will naturally die unless they absorb new elements and morph into a different system?” There seems to be an evident correlation between time elapsed, hosting fatigue, a decrease in member participation, and overall loss of momentum. All the data that has been gathered points in that direction. This leads me to wonder whether the energy for a host comes mostly from a place of learning, rather than teaching? Perhaps hosts are at their highest point of energy when they immerse themselves as part of the journey of discovery? So the question then becomes: how can we facilitate a community, and sustain a space, of joyful learning and growth?

Also, what emerged strongly from the conversations entertained with other hub hosts was the importance of setting the right expectations around the hub hosting role, right from the beginning. There is something to be said about the disappointment that comes with being attached to outcomes, which is the opposite of the joy experienced by letting oneself be surprised. This was suddenly brought home to me when a few hosts shared with me their bitterness at having created a communications campaign with an estimated reach of some two thousand, yet had actually succeeded in convening only a dozen participants. Numerically speaking, that is a disappointing 6% “conversion rate.” So what is it that we are really aiming for? More participants? Or is it perhaps more about the quality of the holding space and interaction that we are able to foster and nurture?

Hub hosting must be approached with an open mind, heart, and will-- towards what is wanting to emerge, and not necessarily to what we, as hub hosts, believe we want to see.

This, in turn brings me to a final reflection about the importance of not losing sight of the U journey as hub hosts. We too must “bend back the beam of observation” onto ourselves and our team system, in a sort of meta U-process. To better serve the mission of creating more wellbeing for all, we must first remember to look at ourselves and our impact in terms of how we are listening, observing, and what we are thereby generating. It is all too easy to forget ourselves in the busy-ness of doing, to lose the
very awareness and wonderment that struck us when we first encountered Theory U.

RESOURCES Below are a couple of resources-- a pre-hub-hosting checklist and a satisfaction survey template-- that I hope might provide some useful tools for currently active or future hub hosts.

PRE-HUB HOSTING CHECKLIST

Here is a checklist with some key points you might want to consider when preparing to host a hub:

• Hosting Team
  o Roles
  o Aspirations
  o Background in Theory U
  o Networks

• Learner audience
  o Background
  o Culture
  o Language
  o Schedule / time availability

• Location / venue:
  o Accessibility?
  o Capacity?
  o Sustainability?

• Team curation: regular checking in and alignment

• Designing the journey – programme structure and timing:
  o alongside the MOOC or
  o self-paced cohort?

• Participant motivation: designing for endurance with in-
terventions to help sustain participation numbers

- Team motivation: make sure to include presencing practices (case clinics, 3-D sculpting)
- Connecting with other hub hosts: sharing difficulties and best practices

SATISFACTION SURVEY

It is good practice for hub hosts to conduct a satisfaction survey in order to improve their approach for the next time. Some questions you might want to ask your learners could be:

- Was the location used practical? Pleasant?
- Was the learning journey too slow? Too fast?
- Was it useful to be part of a cohort?
- Did you find the communications to be clear and helpful?
- Which of the Theory U practices was for you the most impactful?
- Was there a good balance between theory and practice?
- Would you like to stay connected with the learning community?
- Were you able to apply the learnings to your work? To
your life?
• Would you consider taking u.lab again?
• Would you be interested in helping to host a hub, or create a new one?
• Would you recommend u.lab to your family, your friends, your colleagues?
• What worked/didn’t work/could be improved?

References


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u.lab Hub Roma & u.lab Hubs Italy. (2017) Youtube channel. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbvJpH-TC-YMG36pmiX5EUw/videos

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